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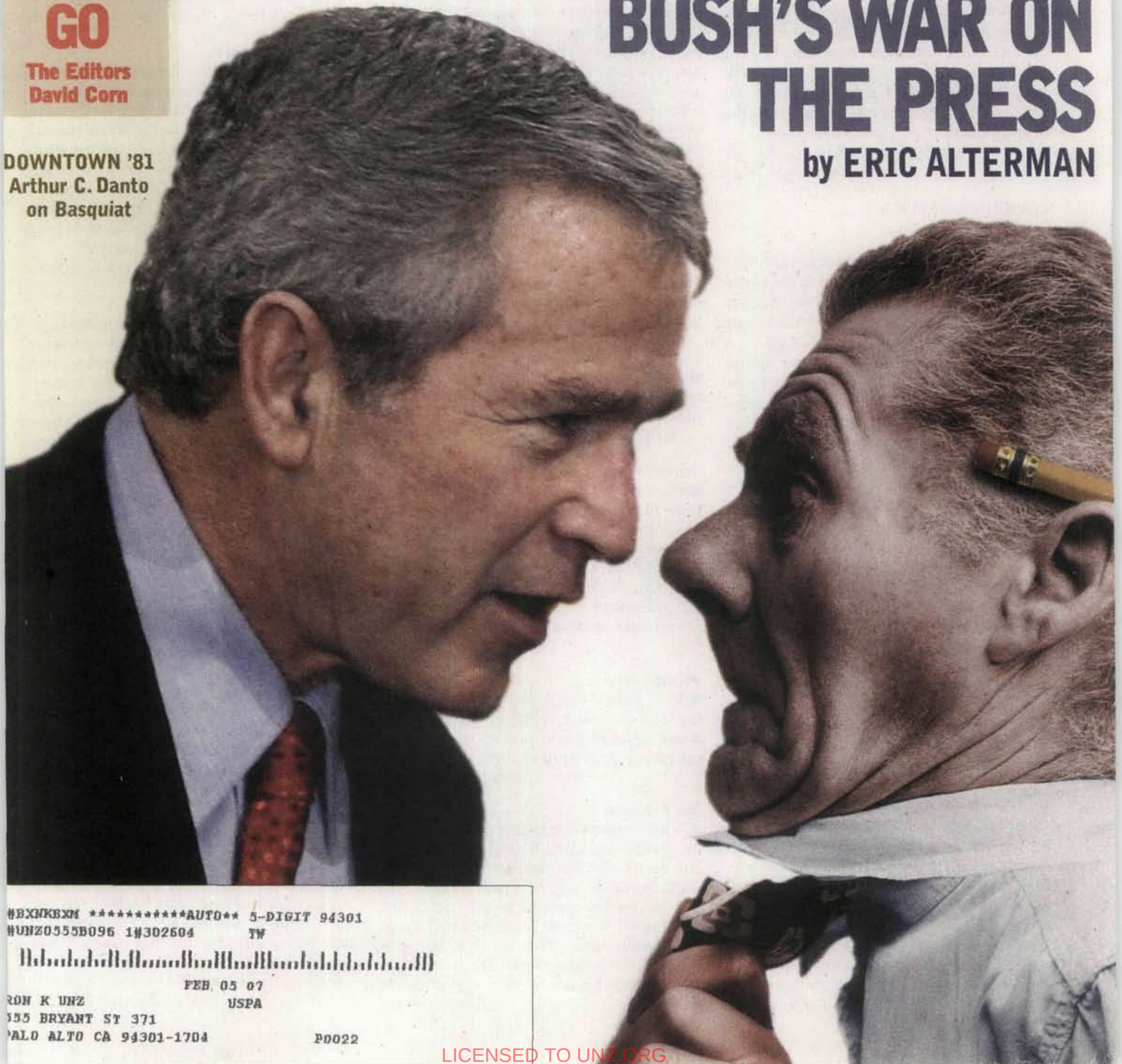
**DELAY
MUST
GO**

The Editors
David Corn

IN YOUR FACE BUSH'S WAR ON THE PRESS

by ERIC ALTERMAN

DOWNTOWN '81
Arthur C. Danto
on Basquiat



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LETTERS

CHRISTOPH NIEMANN

TRADE AIN'T NOTHIN' IF IT AIN'T FREE

Washington, DC

■ As House Democratic whip against CAFTA, I'd like to point out that Alexander Cockburn has a little trouble with math when he claims that "through the 1990s Democrats and Republicans voted for the free-trade agreements" that cost America so many jobs ["Beat the Devil," April 4]. The fact is that a growing majority of Democrats have opposed the North American Free Trade Agreement, Permanent Normal Trade Relations with China and Fast Track Authority. This year, I expect more than 90 percent of House Democrats to vote against the Central American Free Trade Agreement.

REPRESENTATIVE SHERROD BROWN
Author, *Myths of Free Trade*

COCKBURN REPLIES

Petalia, Calif.

■ As with labor and Taft-Hartley, which tore the heart out of the Wagner Act in the 1940s, so with the trade votes in the 1990s. When it mattered, there were always enough Democrats on board to push the crucial bills through. On a fast-track disapproval vote in May 1991, ninety-one House Democrats supported Bush Senior (against 170 who opposed him); on the November 1993 vote on NAFTA, 102 Representatives and twenty-seven senators voted for the bill (versus 156 and twenty-eight, respectively, against). In both votes, although more Democrats were against free trade than for, Democratic votes made approval possible. The story gets worse: In November 1994, on the GATT approval bill, 167 House Democrats and forty-one senators were for it, only eighty-nine and fourteen, respectively, against. So Democrats, by a large majority, gave Clinton the free-trade bill he was looking for.

In July 1998, in a vote sponsored by Representative B. Sanders to prevent future bailouts of US banks and kindred investors, as had just happened in the Mexican peso collapse, only eighty-eight House Democrats supported Sanders; 110 voted to protect the banks. On a 1996 bill that disapproved extending MFN status to China, seventy-five Democrats voted for, 119 against. Then, when it was all far too late, after free trade had momentarily lost its luster in the wake of the Asian economic crisis, the Democrats voted 171 against extending MFN, twenty-nine for.

At this rate, when the last job has left America, we may well see Democrats bolting the stable door in the numbers that Representative Sherrod Brown confidently presages.

ALEXANDER COCKBURN

TERRI-BLE OR TERRI-FIC?

"Tasteless," "ugly," "callous," "vulgar," "abhorrent," "crass," "cruel," "gross," "nasty," "offensive," "disgusting," "mocking," "degrading," "counterproductive" were some of the adjectives aimed at Eric Fischl's April 18 cover art on the Terri Schiavo case, proving the rule that the angry write letters while the approving nod quietly in agreement. Readers were "appalled," "shocked," "revolted," "disappointed," "dismayed," "repelled," and demanded an apology from the editors (who were accused of poor judgment, disrespect, lack of compassion and exploitation) for what one reader called an "insensitive piece of evil crap" and others called a "cheap shot." One reader summed it up as "Sick, Sick, Sick." Not all readers agreed, however.

—The Editors

St. Paul

■ I was deeply disappointed by your cover. By making a caricature of Terri Schiavo, you sink to the level of Tom DeLay, George and Jeb Bush, Jesse Jackson, Bill Frist and all the other opportunists who so cynically exploited this private family crisis. BUTCH THOMPSON

Flushing, NY

■ Your cartoon of Terri Schiavo was extremely tasteless. Moreover, it plays into the hands of the right wing by alienating people who feel sympathy for Terri and her family. ROBERT COWEN

Arlington, Mass.

■ While I found your editorial on Terri Schiavo to be thoughtful and informative, your cover was downright offensive, perpetuating the same indignity you purport to criticize. The cartooning of her face, the intimacy of the messages all beginning, "terri, smile if you..." were trivializing and exploitive. I am very disappointed and am considering canceling my subscription.

JUDITH N. STONE

Philadelphia

■ Terri, smile if you think *The Nation* sank to the level of those it criticizes when it so callously exploited you to advance its own political agenda on its April 18 cover.

CHRISTINE CARLSON

San Francisco

■ What a remarkable lack of judgment, charity, gravitas and class! It's bad enough DeLay and his ilk used Ms. Schiavo, who could not speak up for herself, as a poster child. Now *The Nation* has stooped to their level with Eric Fischl's "cover art." Just wait till they get their hands on this. How better to decry the callous liberals than to pass this around. I'm so disgusted this one is going straight to the recycling bin.

ANNE OSBORNE

New Freedom, Pa.

■ Your cover depicting the unfortunate Terri Schiavo is the cruelest, most tasteless political cartoon that I have ever seen. It is an affront to anyone with any sense of human dignity and common decency, regardless of where they stand on the issue. Your crass exploitation of her fate manages to trump the congressional Republicans' crass, political exploitation of her. Quite a feat.

THOMAS R. RITZEL

Garden Grove, Calif.

■ I've read *The Nation* for several years and enjoyed your spirited advocacy of a political philosophy I largely share. But now you've gone too far. The cruel caricature of the late Terri Schiavo, serving only to exploit her memory in the service of that philosophy, is an unfeeling and tasteless slap at those who actually cared for her, on both sides of the argument. "Have you no sense of decency, sirs? At long last, have you left no sense of decency?"

CHARLES W. AUSTIN

Janesville, Wisc.

■ I was appalled at the cover of your magazine. Perhaps a caricature of Tom Delay see-sawing between his own family's life-ending decision and pandering to the Christian right in an attempt to garner support for this Administration's misguided and failed issues would have been more appropriate. ALICE HESSENAUER

Brooklyn, NY

■ Eric Fischl's cover seems an attempt to satirize the various conflicting efforts to interpret Terri Schiavo's poignant facial expression according to individuals' and groups' own needs and wishes. However, in failing to distinguish between those who ruthlessly exploited her for their own advantage (Bush, DeLay et al.) and parents and family whose years of anguish fed their desperate attempts to keep Terri alive, Fischl himself becomes a subject for scrutiny. Those who cared about Terri deserve sympathy, not Fischl's disdain. The final box of the illustration, perhaps intended as a Swiftian comment on all of us, succeeds rather, as does the entirely tasteless cover, in diminishing Terri and being insensitive to her terrible circumstance.

ARTHUR GELLER

Queens, NY

■ The Terri Schiavo episode has had many ramifications. In my case, possibly the most liberal cartoonist in the country has been silenced. After seven-plus years, King Features and I have parted ways because they refused to run my editorial cartoon on the subject (see it at www.batemanian.com/e032105.jpg). Although

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EDITORIALS

DeLay Must Go

Tom DeLay should resign as leader of the House Republican majority. If he doesn't, Republicans should have the decency to remove him. He's been rebuked unanimously four times by the bipartisan House Ethics Committee—which he then proceeded to purge and disembowel. Three of his political associates are under indictment in Texas for raising illegal corporate campaign contributions. He's luxuriated in lavish junkets on the tab of crooked lobbyists and foreign agents. He's given "family values" a new meaning by paying his wife and daughter \$500,000 from his PACs for part-time work. And one of his cronies, "Casino Jack" Abramoff, who is under investigation for bilking Indian tribes and pressing them to donate to the GOP, says DeLay "knew everything" about what was going on.

Corruption isn't, or shouldn't be, a partisan issue. DeLay isn't in trouble because he's a conservative, as he claims. He's in trouble because he is "The Hammer," the "undisputed and unapologetic master"—as the *Wall Street Journal* puts it—of a Republican-controlled Congress whose hallmark is the flagrant exchange of legislative favors for campaign contributions.

In 1994 Newt Gingrich used charges of Democratic Party corruption to help Republicans win a majority in the House. He and his cohorts drove House speaker Jim Wright out of office for offenses including an improper book deal that wouldn't merit even a mention on DeLay's rap sheet. Ten years later, Gingrich is gone, a victim of his own ethical lapses and leadership failures, and DeLay, elected majority whip under Gingrich and then majority leader, has consolidated a corrupt shakedown operation that would have been the envy of Tammany Hall.

From day one, DeLay began constructing a blatant pay-to-play operation. As one example, DeLay was admonished by the ethics committee for violating "appearances" in the Westar Energy case. In 2002 Westar Energy executives wanted to cover \$3 billion in losses from a failed burglar alarm business by moving

the debt to its public utility and getting Kansas energy consumers to pay the tab. All that was needed was a waiver of the federal law that prohibited regulated utilities from engaging in exactly that sort of scheme. To get this written into the energy bill, Westar executives were given an itemized plan for \$56,500 in contributions—\$25,000 to go to DeLay's Texas PAC and the rest to at least three other members of Congress. For this, they were told by their vice president, they would "get a seat at the table." They made the contributions and joined DeLay for golf at a two-day energy conference at an exclusive Virginia resort. And Westar got its provision inserted in the energy bill. (It was quietly removed after the Westar CEO was indicted on forty counts, including wire fraud and falsifying records.)

DeLay's operations give him immense power over the Republican caucus. According to the Center for Responsive Politics, DeLay collected \$22.4 million from 1989 to 2004, half of which went to helping more than 200 fellow members of Congress. In return, legislators grateful for his financial support toe his line—or learn that his wrath can be costly. DeLay earned another rebuke from the ethics committee for offering GOP legislator Nick Smith what Smith initially described as a bribe to change his vote on the prescription drug bill. If Smith voted for the bill, he first reported, his son's campaign to replace him would get \$100,000 in contributions. If he continued to vote against it, his son would face costly opposition in the primary. Smith later said there was no actual sum mentioned—that would be illegal. But the House Ethics Committee unanimously rebuked DeLay for promising Smith favors in return for his vote.

While corporate lobbies get their loopholes and subsidies and Republicans get their contributions, the American people get to pick up the tab. In the prescription drug bill, for example, drug companies spent millions in lobbying costs and campaign contributions (including to some Democrats). Their generosity was suitably rewarded. The Administration suppressed the true cost of the bill, and Representative Billy Tauzin, negotiating for a million-dollar position as head of a drug company lobby, ushered the bill

EDITORIALS

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through committee. DeLay locked House Democrats out of the conference committee that drafted the final product and then trampled House rules by holding the vote open for three hours while pressuring Republicans like Nick Smith to provide the votes needed to pass it. In the end, the drug companies got a ban on importing cheaper drugs from Canada and a prohibition on using Medicare's buying power to get a better price for seniors. DeLay's corrupt money operation turned a \$500 billion drug bill from a benefit for seniors into a subsidy for the drug companies.

The Republican National Committee talking points in defense of DeLay dismiss his troubles as partisan politics and suggest that his effective leadership will be demonstrated by moving forward with the Republican agenda. But that agenda—a bankruptcy bill designed by the credit card companies, tort "reform" sculpted by companies to limit their liability for injuries caused by their negligence, a Big Oil energy bill that ladles out subsidies to every energy producer while increasing our dependence on foreign oil—doesn't distract from DeLay's corruption but exemplifies it.

A small group of public interest organizations—the Campaign for America's Future, Public Campaign Action Fund, Common Cause, and Citizens for Responsibility and Ethics in Washington—have led the charge against DeLay and done a commendable job of bringing his abuses to public attention. They've shaken the system enough to get Republicans on the ethics committee to try to make the controversy go away by offering to set up a carefully managed "investigation" of DeLay in return for Democratic endorsement of rules changes that would gut the committee's ability to fight corruption. Democrats should stand firm for a real investigation and do what Republicans already charge they are doing: Use DeLay's excesses to expose the corruption of the Congressional majority. Even as they do this, Democrats should make themselves into the party of reform, offering proposals to curb lobbyists, expose the back rooms to sunlight and move toward clean elections that limit the role of big money in politics.

Americans tend to be pretty cynical about politicians and think corruption is widespread. But periodically, when the stench gets particularly bad, they realize it's time to clean out the stables. By 2006 Democrats may find the public ready to do just that. But DeLay's ouster cannot wait that long. He must go—now.

COMMENT

DeLay's Grab for NASA

Who's in charge of the US space program? There's the administrator of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration, for one, and of course the President—and also Tom DeLay.

The scandal-scented Republican House majority leader has invaded NASA, grabbing its biggest outpost and taking a rather personal interest in the agency's budget. He has established himself as the go-to guy on Capitol Hill regarding NASA. And given the way Washington works, this means he can influence how the agency carves up its \$16 billion pie and how it resolves critical policy debates—matters of keen interest

COMMENT

to aerospace and military contractors, who often look to make contributions to friendly or feared legislators. Fans of NASA might cheer DeLay's involvement. "It's always to the benefit of the agency to have someone in the leadership interested in the agency's budget," says Wesley Huntress Jr., an associate administrator of NASA in the 1990s. "And Tom DeLay is very interested in NASA." But anyone concerned about good government and effective and appropriate budgeting decisions ought to fret about The Hammer's sway over NASA. "With NASA changing its spending priorities to support President Bush's vision for space exploration that will return humans to the moon and take them to Mars, there will be plenty of money going to start-up companies with no record of producing hardware, and there will be no way to measure results," says John Pike, director of *globalsecurity.org*. "DeLay, if he wants, will be in charge of a free-for-all, with money flowing everywhere—mainly flying in the direction he directs." NASA, then, is another potential source of money and power for DeLay—if he survives his ethics troubles.

For years, DeLay has expressed an interest in the space program. But last year he hit the boost phase. First, without making much noise about it, he seized the Johnson Space Center. Located outside Houston, the JSC hosts the mission control center that manages space shuttle missions and space station activity, and it oversees development and production of spacecraft for human space exploration. One of the largest employers in Texas, the center boasts about 15,000 workers. Until last year the JSC was miles outside DeLay's Congressional district. When he and other Texas Republicans orchestrated a controversial redrawing of district lines in 2003, they wiped out the district next to DeLay's, a Democratic stronghold that included the JSC. At the same time, an elbow-shaped piece of territory was added to the east side of DeLay's district. This patch stretched far enough to wrap around the Johnson Space Center.

The JSC brass noticed the change. Last August, in the midst of the election, JSC deputy chief counsel Daniel Remington sent a memo to JSC employees noting that nearby University of Houston had scheduled a reception honoring DeLay. "People from NASA, the aerospace community, and other community businesses have been invited to attend this event," Remington wrote. "The event is of direct interest to NASA.... It is my determination that it is in the Agency's interest for NASA attendees and their guests to attend this event." (A day earlier, the JSC general counsel had warned employees against engaging in political activity while on duty.) One long-term JSC employee told the *Houston Press* that the memo "just didn't pass the smell test."

It wasn't until DeLay, who won re-election in November with an unimpressive 55 percent, was sworn in as a House member in January that he officially became the legislator representing the JSC. But before that, he was already acting as NASA's guardian—or avenging—angel. At the start of 2004, Bush proposed spending \$16.2 billion on NASA in the 2005 budget, granting NASA the only proposed spending hike for a domestic agency not involved in defense or homeland security. The funding increase was linked to Bush's new moon-Mars initiative. But not every Republican was enthralled with Bush's proposal. The GOP-run

House appropriations subcommittee on veterans and housing—which oversaw NASA's funding—trimmed NASA's budget by \$1.1 billion, partly to make room for funding for veterans' health-care. Bush then threatened to veto the \$92 billion appropriations bill that included NASA's money. More important, DeLay hit the warpath.

"To me, that's unacceptable," DeLay said of the decrease in NASA funding. "And it would be very hard to get this bill to the floor if it's unacceptable to me." DeLay was right. He kept the subcommittee's bill bottled up. (During this spending battle, aerospace firms like Northrop Grumman and Boeing funded a reception honoring DeLay at the GOP convention.) The appropriations bill covering NASA eventually was incorporated into an omnibus spending measure. And in December DeLay threatened to block that legislation unless NASA received the full funding proposed by Bush. According to Democrats on the appropriations committee, to accommodate DeLay the committee had to apply a nearly 1 percent cut to other programs. This meant slashing \$456 million in education, \$225 million in veterans' healthcare and \$61 million in scientific research. DeLay didn't mind. He held firm and got his way. This approach to budgeting was unprecedented. "Usually the House and the Senate come up with their own numbers for NASA and then compromise at a level in between," says Louis Friedman, executive director of the Planetary Society. "In this case, DeLay intervened, and the final number came out higher than the House or Senate level." DeLay later boasted during a visit to the JSC, "I wouldn't schedule the [spending] bill [for a vote] until NASA was taken care of."

DeLay had single-handedly reworked the federal budget in NASA's favor. Then in February, the Republican leadership reorganized the House Appropriations Committee. Authority

CALVIN TRILLIN

GEORGE BUSH NOMINATES JOHN BOLTON, A 'KISS-UP-KICK-DOWN SORT OF GUY,' TO BE AMBASSADOR TO THE UNITED NATIONS

In foreign parts, they think Bush is a dope.
His words attract derision or a yawn.
They don't pay much attention to his talks,
Unless it's them he's making war upon.

To send these folks John Bolton shows that Bush
Has not grasped T.R.'s famous dictum fully.
Yes, Roosevelt has been misunderstood.
Bush lost the pulpit; he just has the bully.

COMMENT

for NASA was yanked from the subcommittee on veterans and housing and handed to the subcommittee in charge of the State and Justice departments. This was a promotion for NASA. It was also seen on Capitol Hill as an act of revenge. The reorganization plan, said David Obey, the senior Democrat on the House Appropriations Committee, was "simply payback. House majority leader Tom DeLay is retaliating for cuts the Republican-controlled VA-HUD appropriations subcommittee made to the NASA budget request."

DeLay will again loom large as Congress considers the latest budget request for NASA. Bush called for a 2.4 percent increase, even as he proposed cutbacks in other programs, including those serving low-income Americans. At a February hearing, Representative Sherwood Boehlert, GOP chairman of the House Science Committee, said that "in a budget as excruciatingly tight as this one, NASA probably should not get as much as the President has proposed." Republican and Democratic House aides note a concern among legislators that while NASA's budget is going up, the Administration's spending on other science programs is heading south. And Boehlert suggested that throwing so much money at NASA is wasteful: "Even if NASA received every cent it has requested, it would still be trying to do too much at once.... There are a lot of fundamental questions that NASA still isn't ready to answer" about its programs. But a House GOP staffer says that lack of answers won't slow DeLay. House aides who would like to see a policy-driven debate on NASA's budget expect that DeLay will again try to roll them.

Besides NASA's overall funding, there are numerous and difficult matters facing the agency. How should NASA meet Bush's demand that it return astronauts to the moon by 2020? How fast should NASA retire the problematic space shuttle and the aging space station? How swiftly should it proceed with the next-generation rocket ship for human space exploration? Should it move ahead with plans to cancel research-oriented programs like the Voyager mission and the Hubble telescope—hailed by scientists and researchers—no matter how modest the savings, to make room for Bush's moon-Mars initiative? Should it proceed with proposed cutbacks to its less sexy aeronautics program, which conducts research and development on aviation safety and design?

Many of these issues will affect the Johnson Space Center. The JSC will lose jobs as the space shuttle and space stations are decommissioned; it should gain jobs as NASA gears up for the next stage of human space flight. DeLay will undoubtedly care greatly about how this ebb and flow occurs; he will be highly motivated to weigh in on policy deliberations to favor the JSC. "It's in his interest to be intimately involved," says a Republican House aide. "He didn't take JSC into his district to lose jobs." Aerospace, aviation, military and computer contractors also have a stake in how NASA settles these questions—which gives them reason to curry favor with a House majority leader with influence over NASA spending. "This is not just about DeLay bringing money to his district," Pike says. "It's national. If you want a contract with NASA, who are you going to go to? And we all know how you get DeLay's attention. DeLay must realize this. Over time, the amount of discretionary budget authority available to him could add up to billions."

Billions? DeLay is already in Dutch for taking junkets that cost tens of thousands of dollars. How far might he push the envelope of ethics when real money is at stake? If he retains his power and sticks to his pay-to-play ways, perhaps, as king of NASA, the sky will be DeLay's only limit.

DAVID CORN

Let Them Eat Cake

Each day 150 people wait patiently in a large room at the Church of St. Paul and St. Andrew on Manhattan's Upper West Side. When their names are called, they step into the food pantry operated by the West Side Campaign Against Hunger and choose their monthly allotment of canned goods, pasta, cereals and maybe meat and fresh vegetables—enough for three days' worth of meals. This pantry is better stocked than most. Even so, on the day I visited, there was no milk for the many families with young children who had come for help. Since my last visit two years ago, the Human Resources Administration says that demand for emergency food earlier this year had increased 17 percent in New York City, and the Bureau of Labor Statistics reports that food prices there have risen nearly 5 percent over the past year, boosted primarily by higher prices for fresh fruits and milk [see Lieberman, "Hungry in America," August 18, 2003].

Given food price inflation, it's easy to see why the pantry's clients struggle to put food on the table. One-fourth of them double up with other families in cramped living quarters. One-third are school-age children. Half are either working or receive Social Security benefits. The other half, says pantry director Doreen Wohl, "desperately want work. The first thing they ask is, Can you find me a job?" New York is no different from other cities. The 50,000 food pantries and soup kitchens affiliated with America's Second Harvest, the nation's largest domestic hunger-relief organization, have observed an increased need for food that parallels the rise in poverty. In 2001 there were nearly 33 million people living below the poverty line; by 2003 there were almost 36 million. In the past two years, America's Second Harvest has increased its food distribution by 200,000 pounds, to nearly 2 billion pounds annually.

Despite the limitations of emergency food programs, which range from rationing because grocery supplies are sometimes scarce to lack of choice and availability of nutritious options, more Americans will come to depend on Second Harvest if Congress goes along with a major assault on the nation's food and nutrition programs launched by the President in this year's budget. Its casualties, however, won't become obvious until long after George W. Bush leaves the White House. Although some programs appear to be adequately funded for the next fiscal year, the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities points out that for the first time since 1989 an Administration budget has not provided information about proposed funding levels for individual discretionary programs beyond the coming year. "They've hidden how they are proposing deep cuts that will grow over time," says center senior policy analyst Dottie Rosenbaum.

The Women, Infant and Children's (WIC) program, which supplies food to pregnant women and young children, and the

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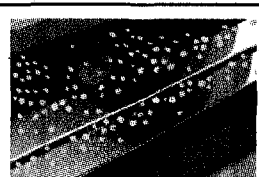
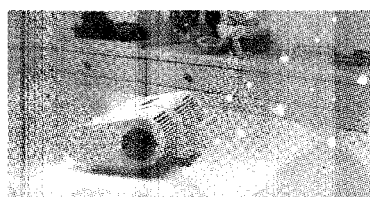
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COMMENT

Older Americans Act programs, which provide home-delivered and group meals to the elderly, are discretionary programs subject to statutory caps on funding, which the Administration wants enacted this year. Shortly before the Easter recess, both the Senate and the House passed their versions of the budget. While those budget blueprints also call for cuts in the food programs, it's not clear yet whether Congress ultimately will enact the mechanism to enforce the caps. If Congress agrees with the President, the center estimates that from 2006 to 2010 WIC will be cut by \$658 million, with the result that some 670,000 women, babies and youngsters under 5 will not be served. This year the President's budget provides for no increase in funding for meals for old people—a 2 percent cut, in real terms. By 2010 the cut will be 14 percent, despite the fact that demand for home-delivered meals has gone up steadily for a decade.

The President's budget also threatens the food stamp program, whose funding depends on the number of eligible people who apply, not on annual discretionary appropriations. Some 300,000 people will lose eligibility under the budget, which calls for eliminating an option that allows participation by working families who have incomes higher than the program normally permits but who also have high childcare and housing expenses. Already only 54 percent of those eligible for food stamps receive them, either because they don't know they qualify or because the bureaucratic hassle is not worth the often meager benefit they receive.

In addition to food stamps, farm subsidies, also slated for the budget ax, are included in the budget bills that go through the House and Senate agriculture committees. Hunger and food advocates fear that those committees may find it politically advantageous to cut food stamps instead of farm programs to meet their overall spending targets—either by reducing benefits or changing the eligibility rules. Farm lobbyists have more clout than hunger advocates, who have been without a real Congressional champion for years.

Last summer the Senate formed a hunger caucus chaired by Elizabeth Dole of North Carolina, Richard Durbin of Illinois, Gordon Smith of Oregon and Blanche Lincoln of Arkansas. Unlike special Congressional caucuses of the past, however, this one does not have money from Congress or even its own staff. Its primary objective is to alert legislators about the plight of the hungry and to provide a place for senators to collaborate on food and hunger issues. That's fine as far as it goes, but the families who come to Doreen Wohl's food pantry need real advocates in Congress who will fight for something as simple and humane as nutritious food for the very young and the very old and buck a White House whose response to hunger seems to be "Let them eat cake."

TRUDY LIEBERMAN

Trudy Lieberman, a regular contributor to The Nation, is director of the Center for Consumer Health Choices at Consumers Union.

In Fact . . .

MINORITY/MAJORITY

■ **Permanent Minority.** Democratic Representatives Ellen Tauscher, Ron Kind, Artur Davis and Adam Smith wrote a public memo urging House Democrats to support the credit card industry-written bankruptcy bill. Meanwhile, Congressman Joe Crowley, who represents a working-class New York district, bragged to newspapers about organizing lobbyists to pressure fellow Democrats to support the bill.

■ **Toward the Majority.** Senator Evan Bayh, normally a staunch advocate of corporate-backed free-trade deals, announced his decision to hold up the nomination of Representative Rob Portman as US Trade Representative. Bayh said he wants answers about why the White House has done nothing to address China's unfair trade practices, which are damaging the US economy. His move comes just a few weeks after "Minority/Majority" criticized Democrats for being silent on the Portman nomination.

—DAVID SIROTA

MIDDLE-CLASS BLUES

■ Lending fresh credence to Tom Frank's thesis that ordinary red-state Americans have been bamboozled by the GOP, the Drum Major Institute for Public Policy's second annual legislative score card gave 90 percent of GOP senators and 99 per-

cent of GOP House members failing grades for their votes on middle-class economic issues in 2004. The nonpartisan public interest group totes up each lawmaker's pro and con votes on legislation benefiting or hurting the middle class (defined as people with annual incomes from \$25,000 to \$100,000), such as the Overtime Compensation Amendment, bankruptcy "reform" and Pell Grant hikes. In contrast, 98 percent of Democratic senators and 100 percent of Democratic Representatives got passing grades, and 49 percent of House Democrats and 47 percent in the Senate received A's. Conclusion: The GOP-dominated Congress prefers corporate tax cuts and faith-based pandering to helping middle-class families cope with rising debts and soaring healthcare and education costs.

ON THE WEB

■ Read David Corn's recollections of Marla Ruzicka and her one-woman crusade to help Afghan and Iraqi victims of the wars. Also, see John Nichols's take on Benedict XVI, "The Vatican's Enforcer" (www.thenation.com).

NEWS OF THE WEAK IN REVIEW

■ "The military has completed a second investigation into the death of Pat Tillman, the pro football star turned Army Ranger, in Afghanistan last year, seeking to address concerns that it had held back information. But the findings will not be made public."

—Associated Press, April 15

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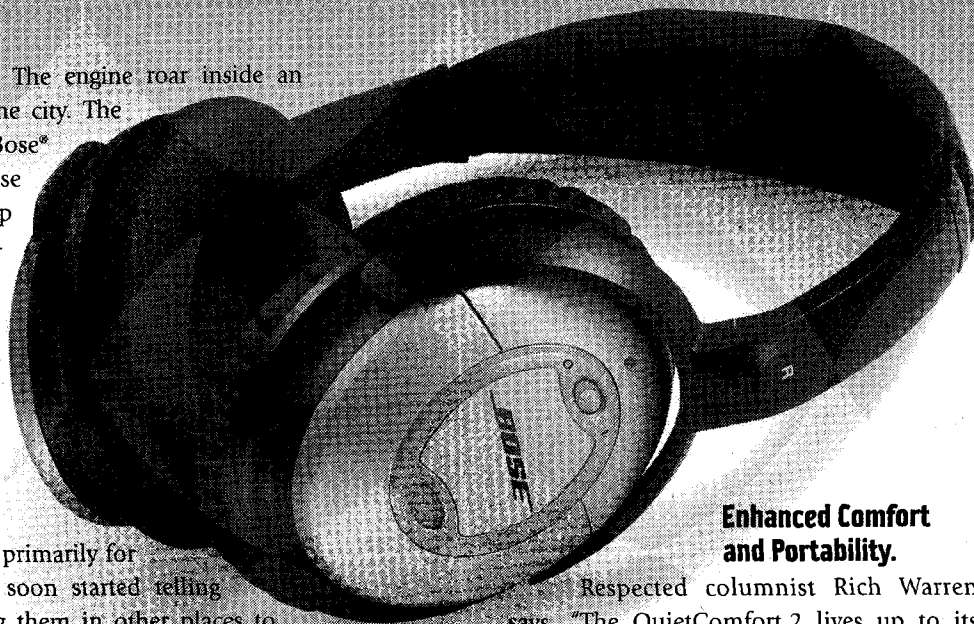
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PATRICIA J. WILLIAMS

The 'Ick' Factor: Villains, Veils and Vision

According to *The Onion* of some weeks ago, Michael Jackson died years ago and was replaced by an alien body snatcher whose presence at Neverland can be documented by the faint but distinct flapping of invisible leathery wings. It captured something, that description, a pervasive sentiment that there is something peculiarly otherworldly about this trial. More recently, I heard commentators on NPR's *On the Media* describe the trial as one that has not gotten the kind of attention that other celebrity debacles have commanded. Unlike Scott Peterson or O.J. Simpson, *People* magazine has given almost no cover status to the Jackson case. He doesn't fit the "narrative," apparently. The narrative requires a victim who can play the role of innocence aggrieved and a defendant who can embody pure villainy. While Jackson's trial is appalling, it is not the stuff of ordinary tabloid catharsis; as one commentator put it, this is just plain "icky."

The precise nature of "ick" went undefined. But it undoubtedly has something to do with the fact that while there's plenty of underage sex, it's allegedly of the homosexual persuasion, which tends to send your average reporter into paroxysms of anxiety. There's a race card bandied about, usually good for some fun, but no one's quite sure which race that might be. There's untold wealth but not a bit of it spent on things most grownups would covet. And while there's an abundance of graft and greed and shady dealing, it sullies every soul within fifty miles of the courthouse; there's just no one to root for.

This exceptionalism, however, disguises the degree to which there is a narrative norm at the core of this. Not just a story of pedophilia, which surely makes it so particularly hard to ponder, but also a plot line that merges P.T. Barnum and Count Dracula. The very strangeness of the trial marks an aversion from seeing, an awkwardness about naming, a hesitation to judge. It is an odd reaction, given the moral temperament of the times; it is a departure from the no-holds-barred rhetoric of good versus evil, of innocence and guilt.

Michael Jackson's narrative is not a simple one that fits onto the front page of something like the *New York Post*. Rather, there is a maze of narratives all running in quite complex and opposite directions. First of all, the allegations are not that different from the scandals that have rocked the Catholic Church. Much like (if also utterly different from) a priest, Jackson has spent his life cloaked in a certain reverence, accorded a degree of trust and hero worship that looks blind and foolish to those of us beyond the ring of enchantment. There's the tangled narrative of Jackson's sexuality: People have speculated that he is gay; his marriages to Lisa Marie Presley and at least one of the mothers of his children were generally met with leering cynicism. But whether he is gay or straight somehow seems to miss the point when it comes to the kind of pedophilia with which he is charged: I'm no expert, but it seems to me that he hasn't grown up enough to have an adult sexual identity; he seems stuck at some stage of pre-

DIARY OF A
MAD LAW
PROFESSOR

pubescence, when life was just one big happy pajama party. I am intrigued by the extent to which Jackson's behavior has suggested the need for psychiatric intervention for a very long time. I wonder that no one in his personal or professional life has insisted on it.

I am intrigued, too, that Jackson's projected childishness has been so engaging to the public, over a period of decades, rather than tragic or troubling. Not so very long ago he was held up as a model for young black men. The first President Bush had him to the White House. His song "Man in the Mirror"

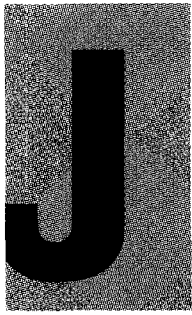
was used to urge self-respect, even though Jackson had the face of a carved jack-o'-lantern even then. There has been great public ambivalence about holding him to adult standards in any sphere, not just his sexual behavior; one wonders if the arrested development of his masculinity may have been somehow comforting to the culture at large. He's a kind of castrato black man-child, presumptively not a sexual predator, the un-O.J., iconically and pathologically immature. Indeed, his peculiar surgical agelessness makes it hard to look at him and wake from the delusion. Even his eerie whiteness has not so much cross-raced him as made him look like he's wearing a mask: His unearthly pale face, delicate as a geisha's yet these days with a jarringly dark stubble of beard; his big-man hands insistently huge and an ugly surprise, contrasting with the innocence of his voice and bizarrely captivating moon-colored face. That he is a full-grown man of nearly 50—a composer, a choreographer and a businessman of considerable acumen—remains almost invisible.

Finally, of course, there's the narrative of those around Jackson: greedy celebrity hounds, shady parents, nutty caretakers, troubled older boys (a category of victim whose credibility is more vexed than that of younger girls) and assorted hangers-on, not one of whom hasn't stolen some knickknack from Jackson's home in order to sell it off on eBay. However pathological Jackson's identity may be, the jury will have to decide if it's not also entirely possible that he was set up by a Dickensian procession of liars and ne'er-do-wells.

The media try to follow all this, but they sense the powerful magical quicksand in this one. The crosscurrents are confusing and treacherous, the going murky. Jackson performs whiteness, disembodies blackness. He performs femininity while disembodiment masculinity. He performs childishness while disembodiment adulthood. At the center is this extreme redundancy of disembodiment. We know the trial of such a one can only end badly. Michael Jackson convicted and sent to a real prison with genuine beefcake? Michael Jackson acquitted and going back to raise his veiled, shadowy, got-to-be-damaged brood? Am I the only one who feels that he needs another kind of institution? Is there not a Betty Ford clinic for the sexually traumatized, where Michael Jackson and Courtney Love and Paris Hilton and all Hollywood's lost boys and girls can find solace and grieve for their ruined childhoods and finally, perhaps, grow up?

But I guess there's not a script for that. ■

ARTICLES



Journalists, George Bernard Shaw once said, “are unable, seemingly, to discriminate between a bicycle accident and the collapse of civilization.”

How odd, given the profession’s unequalled

reputation for narcissism, that Shaw’s observation holds true even when the collapsing “civilization” is their own.

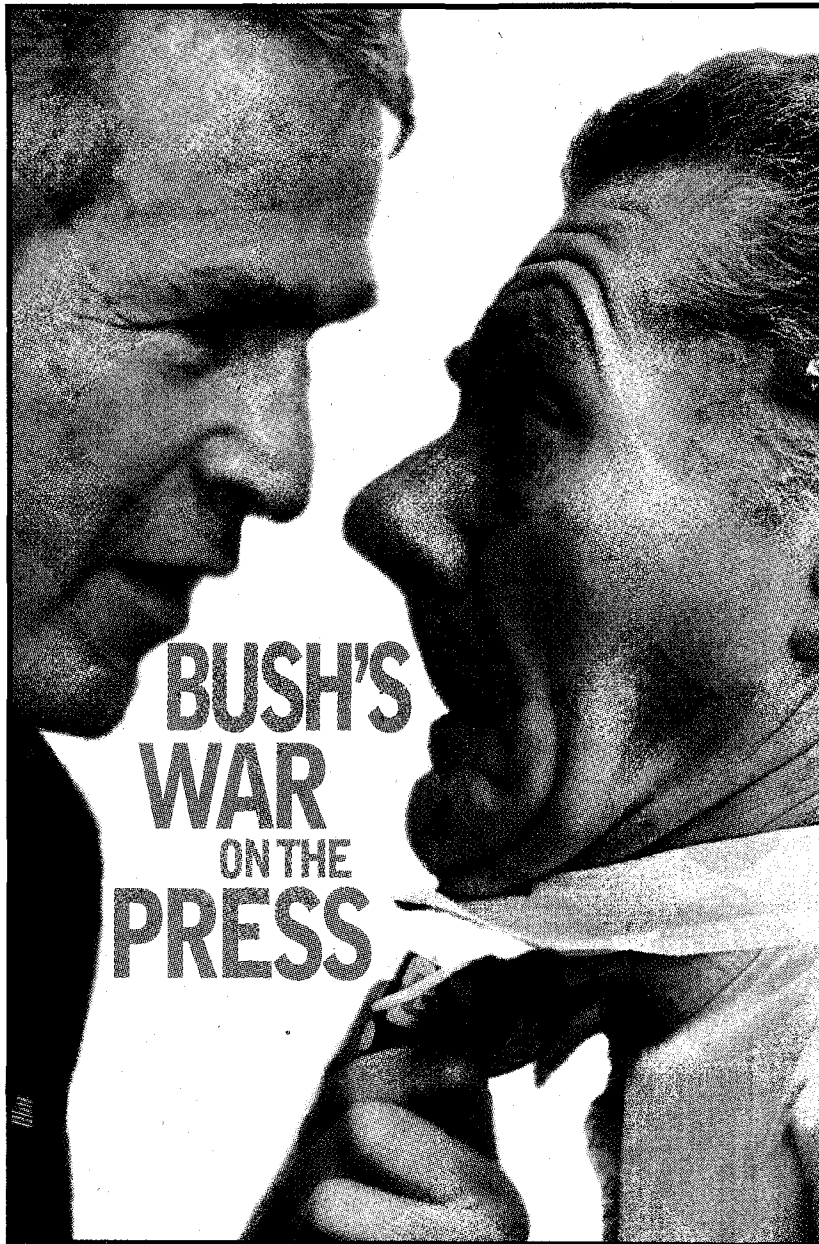
Make no mistake: The Bush Administration and its ideological allies are employing every means available to undermine journalists’ ability to exercise their First Amendment function to hold power accountable. In fact, the Administration recognizes no such constitutional role for the press. White House Chief of Staff Andrew Card has insisted that the media “don’t represent the public any more than other people do.... I don’t believe you have a check-and-balance function.”

Bush himself, on more than one occasion, has told reporters he does not read their work and prefers to live inside the information bubble blown by his loyal minions. Vice President Cheney feels free to kick the *New York Times* off his press plane, and John Ashcroft can refuse to speak with any print reporters during his Patriot-Act-a-palooza publicity tour, just to compliant local TV. As an unnamed Bush official told reporter Ron Suskind, “We’re an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality. And while you’re studying that reality—judiciously, as you will—we’ll act again, creating other new realities, which you can study too, and that’s how things will sort out. We’re history’s actors....and you, all of you, will be left to just study what we do.” For those who didn’t like it, another Bush adviser explained, “Let me clue you in. We don’t care. You see, you’re outnumbered two to one by folks in the big, wide middle of America, busy working people who don’t read the

New York Times or *Washington Post* or the *LA Times*.”

But the White House and its supporters are doing more than just talking trash—when they talk at all. They are taking

aggressive action: preventing journalists from doing their job by withholding routine information; deliberately releasing deceptive information on a regular basis; bribing friendly journalists to report the news in a favorable context; producing their own “news reports” and distributing these free of charge to resource-starved broadcasters; creating and crediting their own political activists as “journalists” working for partisan operations masquerading as news organizations. In addition, an Administration-appointed special prosecutor, US Attorney Patrick Fitzgerald, is now threatening two journalists with jail for refusing to disclose the nature of conversations they had regarding stories they never wrote, opening up a new frontier of potential prosecution. All this has come in the wake of a decades-long effort by the right and its corporate allies to subvert journalists’ ability to report fairly on power and its abuse by attaching the label “liberal bias” to even the most routine forms of information gathering and reportage (for a transpar-



by ERIC ALTERMAN

ent example in today’s papers, see under “DeLay, Tom”). Some of these tactics have been used by previous administrations too, but the Bush team and its supporters have invested in and deployed them to a degree that marks a categorical shift from the past.

Many of these lines of attack on the press might at first appear to have little in common. What does an increase in official secrecy have to do with payments to pundits, or the broadcast of official video news releases, or the presence of a right-wing charlatan in the White House press room pretending to be a reporter and serving up softball questions to the President in prime time? And how is any of this connected to the Administration’s willingness to mis-

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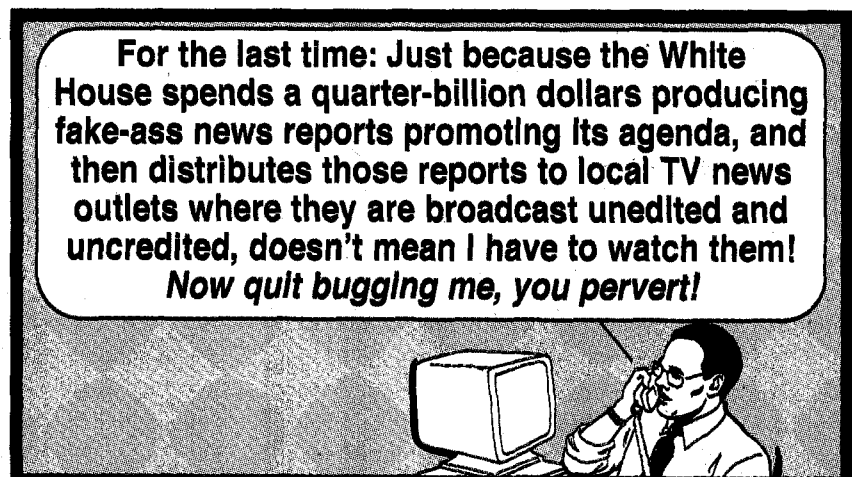
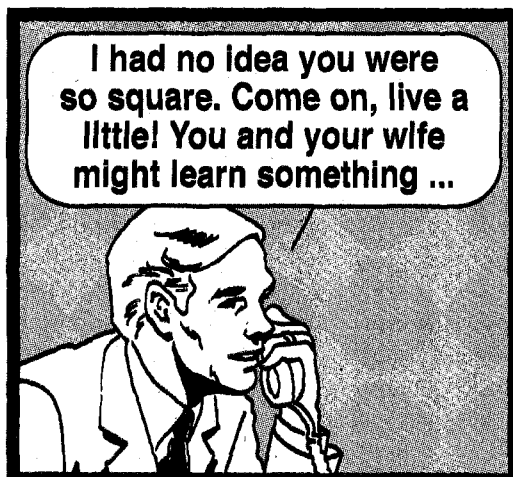
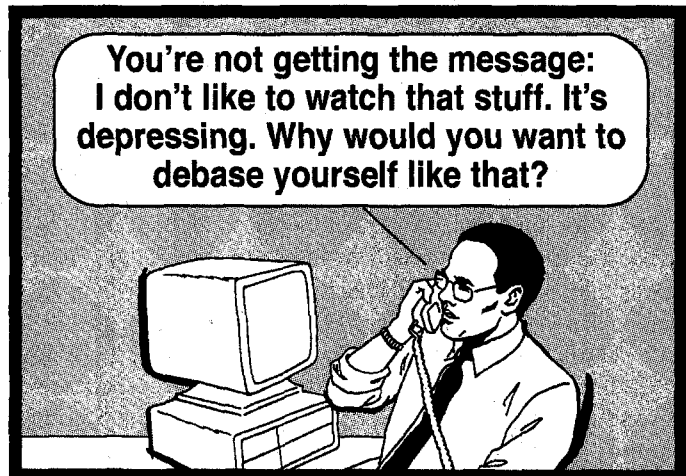
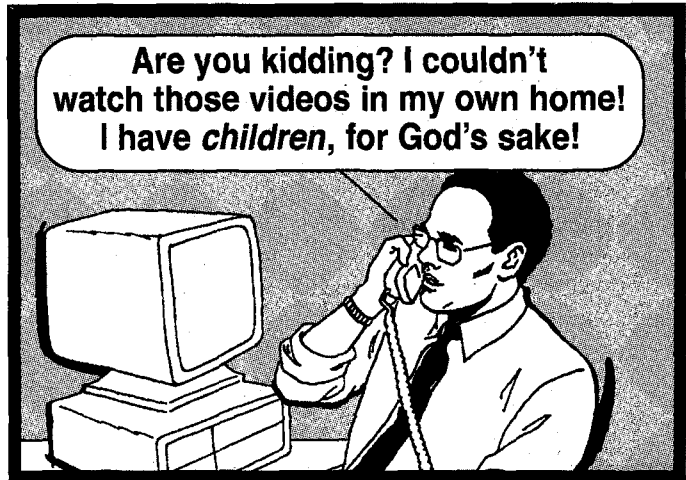
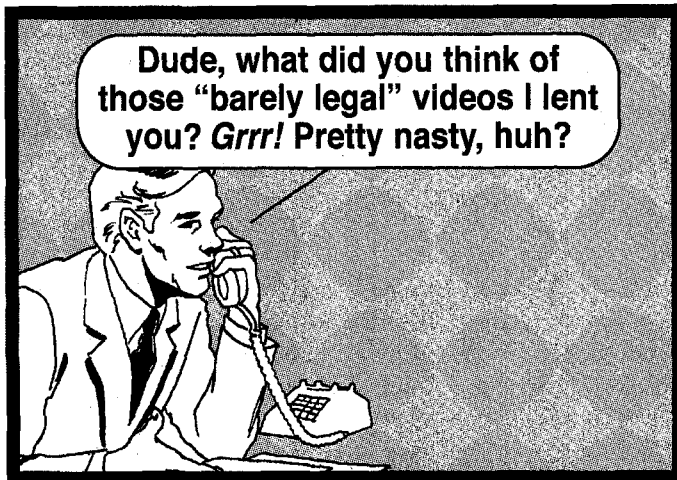
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David Rees

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The right wing's media "decertification" effort, as the journalism scholar and blogger Jay Rosen calls it, has its roots in forty years of conservative fury at the consistent condescension it experienced from the once-liberal elite media and the cosmopolitan establishment for whom its members have spoken. Fueled by this sense of outrage, the right launched a multifaceted effort to fight back with institutions of its own, including think tanks, advocacy organizations, media pressure groups, church groups, big-business lobbies and, eventually, its own television, talk-radio, cable and radio networks (to be augmented, later, by a vast array of Internet sites). Today this triumphant movement has captured not only much of the media and the public discourse on ideas but both the presidency and Congress (and soon, undoubtedly, the Supreme Court as well); it can wage its war on so many fronts simultaneously that it becomes nearly impossible to see that almost all these efforts are aimed at a single goal: the destruction of democratic accountability and the media's role in insuring it.

The Bush attack on the press has three primary components—Secrecy, Lies and Fake News. Consider these examples:

Secrecy

All Presidents try to keep secrets; it comes with the job description. Following 9/11, the need for secrecy increased significantly. Bush, however, has taken advantage of this new environment to shut down the natural flow of information between the governing and the governed in ways that have little or nothing to do with the terrorist threat. As Charles Lewis of the Center for Public Integrity points out, "The country has seen a historic, regressive shift in public accountability. Open-records laws nationwide have been rolled back more than 300 times—all in the name of national security." Federation of American Scientists secrecy specialist Steven Aftergood adds, "Since President George W. Bush entered office, the pace of classification activity has increased by 75 percent.... His Information Security Oversight Office oversees the classification system and recorded a rise from 9 million classification actions in fiscal year 2001 to 16 million in fiscal year 2004."

Some of these efforts may be justified as prudent preparation in the face of genuine threats, but this is hard to credit, given the contempt the Administration has demonstrated for the public's right to information in non-security-related matters. Upon entering office, Bush attempted to shield his Texas gubernatorial records by shuttling them into his father's presidential library. That was followed by an executive fiat designed to hide his father's presidential records, as well as those of the Reagan/Bush Administration, by blocking the scheduled release of documents under the Presidential Records Act of 1978 and

issuing a replacement presidential order that allowed not only Presidents but also their wives and children to keep their records secret. (The records had already been scrubbed for national security implications.)

In the aftermath of 9/11, Administration efforts to prevent accountability accelerated to warp speed. Attorney General Ashcroft reversed a Clinton Administration-issued policy governing FOIA requests that allowed documents to be withheld only when "foreseeable harm" would likely result, to one in which merely a "sound legal basis" could be found. And that was just the beginning. Even when documents were not withheld de jure, Administration officials often withheld them de facto. When People for the American Way sought documents on prisoners' cases being litigated in secret, the Justice Department required it to pay \$373,000 in search fees before officials would even look. "It's become much,

much harder to get responses to FOIA requests, and it's taking much, much longer," David Schulz, the attorney who helps the Associated Press with FOIA requests, explained to a reporter. "Agencies seem to view their role as coming up with techniques to keep information secret rather than the other way around. That's completely contrary to the goal of the act."

In addition, as Aftergood notes, "an even more aggressive form of government information control has gone unenumerated and often unrecognized in the Bush era, as government agencies have restricted access to unclassified information in libraries, archives, websites and official databases." These sources were once freely available but are now being withdrawn from view under the classification "sensitive but unclassified" or "for official use only." They include: the Pentagon telephone directory, the Los Alamos technical report library, historical records at the National Archives and the Energy Department intelligence budget, among many others. Even more alarming is the web of secrecy surrounding the operations of what has become the equivalent of a police state at Guantánamo Bay and other military prisons around the world, where the accused are routinely denied due process and traditional rules of evidence are deemed irrelevant. Exactly two members of Congress, both sworn to secrecy, are being briefed by the CIA on these programs. The rest of Congress, the media and the public are given no information to judge the legality, morality or effectiveness of these extralegal machinations, some of which have already resulted in officially sanctioned torture and possibly even murder.

Lies

The issue of "lies" has been the most consistently clouded by the Administration's supporters in the conservative media, who refuse to report facts when they conflict with White House spin. It's true, as I show in my book *When Presidents Lie: A History of Official Deception and Its Consequences*, that many presidents have demonstrated an almost allergic reaction to accuracy. Still, the Bush Administration manages to set a new standard here as well, reducing reality to a series of inconvenient obstacles to be ignored in favor of ideological prejudices and political imperatives—and it has done so virtually across the entire execu-

Eric Alterman is a Nation columnist, a senior fellow at the Center for American Progress, an MSNBC blogger, a professor of journalism at Brooklyn College and the author of six books. Research support for this article was provided by the Investigative Fund of the Nation Institute.

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tive branch. As Michael Kinsley noted way back in April 2002, "What's going on here is something like lying by reflex.... Bush II administration lies are often so laughably obvious that you wonder why they bother. Until you realize: They haven't bothered. If telling the truth was less bother, they'd try that too."

Rather than regurgitate that fruitless debate over the war—the deliberate untruths told by the Administration have been delineated ad nauseam—consider just two recent examples of its deception on matters relating to scientific and medical evidence:

§ Mercury emissions: When the EPA unveiled a rule to limit mercury emissions from power plants, Bush officials argued that anything more stringent than the EPA's proposed regulations would cost the industry far in excess of any conceivable benefit to public health. They hid the fact, however, that a Harvard study paid for by the EPA, co-written by an EPA scientist and peer-reviewed by two other EPA scientists, found exactly the opposite, estimating health benefits 100 times as great as the EPA did. Even more shocking, according to a GAO investigation, the EPA had failed to "quantify the human health benefits of decreased exposure to mercury, such as reduced incidence of developmental delays, learning disabilities, and neurological disorders."

§ Nuclear materials: The *Los Angeles Times* recently reported that government scientists apparently submitted phony data to demonstrate that a proposed nuclear waste dump in Nevada's Yucca Mountain would be safe. As with the EPA and mercury emissions, the Interior Department found unsatisfactory the results of a study from the Los Alamos National Laboratory concluding that rainwater moved through the mountain sufficiently quickly for radioactive isotopes to penetrate the ground in a few decades, so it just pretended it hadn't happened.

In these two emblematic cases, as it has done so many times before, the Administration simply issued its own pronouncements, ignored reality and went its merry way, damn the consequences both for the reality of its policies and for its own credibility. Those found guilty of deception did not mind the one-day story that would result demonstrating them to be liars any more than Vice President Cheney minded the fact that a videotape existed of him claiming on *Meet the Press* that the alleged Prague meeting between Mohammed Atta and an Iraqi intelligence official had been "pretty well confirmed" when he twice insisted, also on videotape, that he "never said that." And the political calculation turned out to be a good one. It was left to *The Daily Show* to run the two tapes of Cheney together. Reporters may have been angry at being lied to, but they returned the next day to swallow some more.

Fake News

The Bush Administration has invested untold millions in video "news releases" that disguise themselves as genuine news reports and are frequently broadcast by irresponsible local news programs. In three separate opinions in the past year, the Congressional Government Accountability Office held that government-made news segments may constitute

Phony news reports have much in common with 'public' presidential events that bar all potential dissenters and script every utterance.

improper "covert propaganda" even if their origin is made clear to television stations. Yet the Administration has rejected these rulings, fortified by a Justice Department opinion that insists that the reports are purely informational. Of course, the Administration's idea of "purely informational" is sufficiently elastic to stretch all the way from the White House to Ahmad Chalabi's house. As the *New York Times* reported, a "jubilant" Iraqi-American chanting "Thank you, Bush. Thank you, USA" is deemed to fall into this category, as is a report of "another success" in the Administration's "drive to strengthen aviation security" in which the "reporter" called the effort "one of the most

remarkable campaigns in aviation history." A third segment, broadcast in January, described the Administration's commitment to opening markets for American

farmers. The reports are clearly designed to simulate legitimate news programming. A now-infamous report narrated by PR flack Karen Ryan for the Department of Health and Human Services praising the benefits of the new Medicare bill imitated a real news report by having her sign off as "Karen Ryan, reporting" and by not identifying the story's source. The Clinton Administration made use of video "news releases" as well, but now the government's investment in them appears to have nearly doubled, as has its brazenness.

These phony news reports have much in common with stage-managed "public" presidential events that bar all potential dissenters and script virtually every utterance. In March, for instance, three people found themselves kicked out of a Bush Social Security event because of a bumper sticker on their car in the parking lot that read NO MORE BLOOD FOR OIL. White House press secretary Scott McClellan said a volunteer asked the three to leave "out of concern they might try to disrupt the event," but, of course, no evidence of any potential disruption could be found save the "thought crime" of coming to the event with an antiwar bumper sticker on a car. This was not, recall, a Bush/Cheney '04 campaign event but a presidential forum to discuss the future of Social Security. (Previously citizens had been kept out of Bush events because of clothing deemed inappropriate or for reasons unexplained, as when most of a group of forty-two, barred from an event in Fargo, North Dakota, later discovered that what they had in common was membership on a Howard Dean meetup.com list.)

In addition to creating its own mediated version of reality, the Administration has also invested considerable resources in corrupting members of the media with cash payments, in what George Miller, ranking Democrat on the Committee on Education and the Workforce, has termed a "potentially criminal mismanagement of expensive contracts." These include hundreds of thousands of dollars in payments to right-wing pundits Armstrong Williams (\$240,000), Maggie Gallagher (\$21,000) and Michael McManus (\$10,000), the conservative author of the syndicated column "Ethics & Religion," who, like Williams, was paid to help promote a marriage initiative. And yet the resulting scandal has benefited the Administration's war on the press by damaging journalism's public image and reinforcing the false belief that everyone in the media is somehow "on the take."

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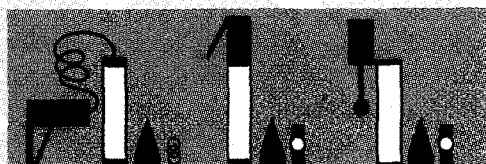
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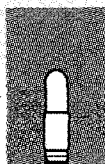
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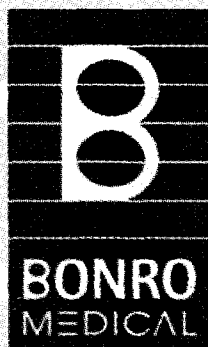
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Undoubtedly the Administration's most bizarre effort to manipulate the media was its embrace of former gay prostitute James Guckert, *a.k.a.* Jeff Gannon, who showed up at the White House under a phony name and worked for a right-wing shell operation that acted less like a news organization than an arm of the Republican National Committee, publishing articles like "Kerry Could Become First Gay President." Gannon's ostensible employer, Talon News Service, employed an editor in chief, Bobby Eberle, who served as a delegate to the 1996, 1998 and 2000 Texas Republican Conventions and to the 2000 Republican National Convention and enjoyed many direct connections to Republican and right-wing organizations. Press secretary McClellan would often call on Gannon when he wanted to extricate himself from a particularly effective line of questioning. The words "Go ahead, Jeff," signaled that the press corps could be getting into an area that might embarrass the White House—or could be discovering a nugget of genuine news. Gannon's ploy might have continued indefinitely had the President not helped make him famous by calling on him at a January 26 news conference in order to be served up a softball that mocked Democrats for being "divorced from reality." Once exposed, Gannon resigned and Talon folded up shop like a rolled-up CIA cover-op. As James Pinkerton, an official in both the Reagan and Bush I White House, admitted on Fox News, getting the kind of clearance Gannon did in this security atmosphere must have required "an incredible amount of intervention from somebody high up in the White House," that it had to be "conscious" and that "some investigation should proceed, and they should find that out." As Frank Rich observed, "Given an all-Republican government, the only investigation possible will have to come from the press."

Perhaps the most disturbing aspect of this war against the media has been the fact that members of the media have largely behaved as if it is just business as usual. In fact, much of the success of the effort derives from the cooperation, both implicit and explicit, of the press. No one, after all, forces local TV stations to run official propaganda videos in lieu of their own programming, or without identifying them as such, and no one forces CNN Newsource, among others, to distribute them. And why did the curious mystery of "Gannon," despite its obvious newsworthiness—and sex appeal—receive so little critical coverage and virtually no outrage in the mainstream press? (*Washington Post* media critic and CNN talking head Howard Kurtz even went so far as to blame the scandal on "these liberal bloggers, [who] have started investigating his personal life in an effort to discredit him," and the National Press Club invited Gannon to be an honored guest on a panel on blogging and journalistic credibility.) Mike McCurry, White House press secretary under Bill Clinton, says he marvels at the willingness of the press corps to swallow the various humiliations offered them by Bush & Co. He told a recent gathering of Washington reporters and editors, "I used to think that if I ever tried to control the message as effectively as the current White House did, that I would have been run out of the White House press briefing

room. But clearly I misjudged the temperament that exists."

The media's failure to resist this assault is perhaps understandable. Members of the profession are under siege from so many directions simultaneously they may feel they can hardly keep up with each incoming salvo. Not only is much of the traditional media controlled by multinational corporations that view their operations not as a public trust but as profit centers to be squeezed, but newspapers are facing an alarming decline in readership (and more than a few are admitting to having padded those numbers all along). Broadcast news has been steadily losing audience share for decades. In a vicious cycle, the results of such declines are *more* declines, as resources are cut to match reduced profits and pressure escalates from above to do more

with less. Meanwhile, more and more "news" programs are succumbing to the tabloid temptation, and the lowering of quality has been accompanied by a proliferation

Much of the success of the Bush war on media derives from the cooperation, both implicit and explicit, of the press itself.

of factual errors, plagiarism and outright fiction proffered as reportage, further undermining public respect for the field. As Philip Meyer recently wrote in *The Columbia Journalism Review*, there is a sense that journalism itself "is being phased out. Our once noble calling is increasingly difficult to distinguish from things that look like journalism but are primarily advertising, press agency, or entertainment." Throw in the nonstop ideological assault from the self-intoxicated section of the (mostly conservative) blogosphere, from (even more conservative) talk-radio and cable loudmouths like Limbaugh and O'Reilly, plus the fact that members of generations X and Y seem more likely to commit acts of terrorism than pick up a newspaper or watch a news broadcast, and it seems almost a luxury to worry about the Bush Administration's attack as well.

Another reason for the press's complacency is that many of these tactics are nothing new. Reporters have always engaged in a complex push-me/pull-you relationship with the President, alternately sucking up and pulling down as the political tides rose and fell. More than thirty years ago, Daniel Patrick Moynihan observed in *Commentary* that "in most essential encounters between the Presidency and the press, the advantage is with the former. The President has a near limitless capacity to 'make' news which must be reported.... The President also has considerable capacity to reward friends and punish enemies in the press corps.... Finally, a President who wishes can carry off formidable deceptions." What's unprecedented is the degree to which this Administration has employed these efforts to undermine the journalist's democratic function.

His formidable deceptions notwithstanding, George W. Bush has charmed many in the press personally, and his Administration, in the person of Karl Rove, has impressed them with its political perspicacity. Media insiders believe Bush/Rove to be a tougher political combination than most but have trouble believing they are seeking to effect a fundamental transformation in press-presidential relations. Media insiders appear to like Bush a great deal more than the public does and frequently overestimate his popularity (in fact, in early April, Bush's approval rating had fallen to the lowest level of

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Kenneth W. Harl (Ph.D., Yale University) is Professor of History at Tulane University, where he has earned the annual Student Award for Excellence in Teaching no fewer than eight times. Baylor University named him the Fall 2001 winner of its nationwide Robert Foster Cherry Award for Great Teachers.

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any President since World War II at this point in his second term, according to the Gallup organization).

What's more, for journalists to admit they are being deceived, or even manipulated, contradicts their sense of self-importance as "players" in a perpetual game of good governance. To read ABC News's "The Note"—which has developed into a kind of *Pravda* for the "Gang of 500" who cover national politics every day—is to enter a world in which the President and his advisers are treated in a manner not unlike the way *US Weekly* treats "Brad and Jen." Its affectionate tone speaks, too, to Washington reporters' coziness with the subjects they're ostensibly covering, their sources. McCurry notes that unnamed sources are such a problem today in part because reporters are frequently more eager to grant anonymity than officials are to demand it. "I have had probably thousands of conversations with reporters in twenty-five years as a press secretary, and I'd say 80 percent of the time I am offered anonymity and background rather than asking for it. I rarely have to ask for it and don't ask for it because I prefer to keep on the record as often as I can."

While individual reporters and even news organizations are undoubtedly vulnerable to White House retaliation if they refuse to play ball—former White House officials spoke openly of their desire to punish CBS and Dan Rather—if these organizations were to unite on behalf of their constitutional charge and collective dignity, they would likely find a White House that knows when it's beaten. Alas, reporters, like Democrats and cats, are maddeningly hard to organize. When some recently tried to map out a collective response to the White House's secrecy obsession, it got few takers. Knight-Ridder reporter Ron Hutcheson, president of the White House Correspondents' Association, walked out of an anonymous

briefing last term to be followed by exactly no one. Len Downie, executive editor of the *Washington Post*, has ruled out the possibility of participation in any such action. "We just don't believe in unified action," he explained in a note to former *Post* ombudsman Geneva Overholser, "and would find a discussion aimed at reaching agreement with others on 'practicable steps' or even agreement on when not to agree to various ground rules uncomfortable and unworkable."

The net result of this one-sided battle is the de jure destruction of the balance that has characterized the American political system since the modern, nonpartisan media began to emerge a century ago. And unless journalists find a way to fight back for the honor, dignity and, ultimately, effectiveness of their profession, the press's role in American democracy and society will continue to diminish accordingly, to the disadvantage of all our citizens. Bush adviser Karen Hughes has explained, "We don't see there being any penalty from the voters for ignoring the mainstream press." And there's been none to date. Speaking to *Salon's* Eric Boehlert, Ron Suskind outlined what he sees as the ultimate aim of the Administration upon which he has reported so effectively. "Republicans have a clear, agreed-upon plan how to diminish the mainstream press," he warns. "For them, essentially the way to handle the press is the same as how to handle the federal government; you starve the beast. When it's in a weakened and undernourished condition, then you're able to effect a variety of subtle partisan and political attacks."

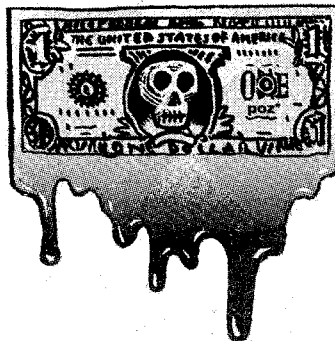
"Two cheers for democracy," wrote E.M. Forster, "one because it admits variety and two because it permits criticism." But the aim of the Bush offensive against the press is to do just the opposite; to insure, as far as possible, that only one voice is heard and that no criticism is sanctioned. The press may be the battleground, but the target is democracy itself. ■

UNOCAL'S SETTLEMENT WITH BURMESE VILLAGERS MAY SPUR BETTER CORPORATE CONDUCT.

A Big Win for Human Rights

DAPHNE EVIATAR

Early in April, the California-based Unocal Corporation announced it was being bought out by its neighbor, the oil giant Chevron-Texaco. Splashed across the business pages, the news overshadowed another announcement, made much more quietly two weeks earlier: that Unocal had agreed to pay to settle a long-running lawsuit charging the oil company with assisting and encouraging the torture, murder and rape of Burmese villagers by government soldiers so that Unocal could build a gas pipeline. The timing of these two announcements is no



PETER O. ZIERLEIN

coincidence, and it underscores just how seriously these legal cases are now being taken in corporate boardrooms. Once considered mere nuisances, lawsuits implicating corporations in international human rights abuses have become major obstacles to corporate profitability and prospects.

"Companies like Unocal have been claiming all along that these cases are not to be taken seriously, that they're just brought by a bunch of activists for political reasons without legal grounds, and that no one's had to pay for them and no one ever will," says Katie Redford, a lawyer for EarthRights International, who helped put the case together in 1996 on behalf of one of two groups of Burmese refugees. (Most of the plaintiffs have fled the country and remained anonymous since the case was filed, to

Daphne Eviatar, a Brooklyn-based writer, is a 2005 Alicia Patterson Fellow. She has written about international law and development for *The New York Times Magazine*, *The Nation* and others.

protect them from retaliation by the Burmese government; see also Eviatar, "Profits at Gunpoint," June 30, 2003.) "Companies have been able to mislead themselves and the public that human rights concerns would not affect their bottom line. That's just not the case anymore."

About two dozen cases have been filed against major multinational corporations charging complicity with foreign governments in extraordinary brutality ranging from executions to rape and genocide, usually committed by a foreign military contractually obligated to protect corporate operations. Although about half have been dismissed, usually on procedural grounds, another dozen are still pending. Defendants include some of the largest and most profitable companies in the world: Royal Dutch/Shell, ChevronTexaco, Coca-Cola and ExxonMobil. The Burma case is the first of these to be settled for money damages. Although as a condition of the settlement the size of the payment is confidential, both sides say that the fifteen Burmese villagers who brought the case—each with a unique horror story—won significant monetary compensation. They'll also get money to develop a program to improve the living conditions, healthcare and education of the people who live in the pipeline region, and to help protect them from future abuses. "It's more money than these people will ever know what to do with," says Redford, who just returned from Thailand, where she was visiting the plaintiffs and took some of them shopping for the first time in their lives. "Now they can buy food when they're hungry or medicine when their kids are sick," says Redford. "No one can give them back what they lost, but they wanted this to be a deterrent."

Unocal unwittingly revealed the seriousness of the settlement when in March it boldly sued its insurance companies for the costs of the case. "The allegations of forced labor, murder, rape, torture, battery, forced relocation and detention throughout the Myanmar litigation fall within the policies' 'personal injuries coverage,'" Unocal said in the lawsuit. The insurance companies—which together insured Unocal for up to \$60 million in damages—denied the company's claims. That Unocal sued both its primary insurer and its re-insurers, which would only reimburse claims beyond an initial loss of \$15 million, makes clear that Unocal's costs were significantly higher than that. Attorneys' fees alone are estimated to have been at least \$15 million.

But as important as the settlement is the strong legal precedent the Unocal case has set. A series of federal court rulings in California established that a corporation that assists or encourages human rights violations by a foreign government, in this case the Burmese military, can be held legally responsible in a US court. "The standard disclaimers that they've used: that it wasn't our president physically torturing the villagers who worked on the pipeline, it was the government, our joint venture partner, doing this—the Unocal case established that they can't say that anymore," says Jennie Green, a lawyer for the Center for Constitutional Rights who was one of a group of lawyers representing the Burmese villagers.

It's 'just not the case anymore' that human rights concerns don't affect the bottom line, says EarthRights lawyer Katie Redford.

For years, business groups lobbied hard for repeal of the Alien Tort Claims Act, the law that allowed the suit. The Bush Administration has also taken an unusually strong stand against these cases, intervening several times to ask courts to dismiss them. In the Unocal case Attorney General John Ashcroft filed a brief to the Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit denouncing the villagers' attempt to sue under the alien tort law and, in a sweeping argument that surprised even corporate advocates, argued that every court that had allowed these claims in the past twenty years had been wrong. The court rejected his arguments.

But in some ways, the case against Unocal was easy. "This case was unusually well documented," says Harold Hongju Koh, dean of Yale Law School and an expert on human rights law. "Not every case will have that." Indeed, the evidence against the company was damning. Although Unocal repeatedly denied that it knew the Burmese government was using forced labor to clear the land it needed to build the corporation's pipeline, documents revealed that Unocal's consultants had repeatedly warned it of the military's abuses, at one point stating unequivocally that "egregious human rights violations have occurred." The State Department and the United Nations had also denounced the brutality of the Burmese regime.

Experts say this case and the settlement will have a broad impact on corporations and force them to consider their conduct overseas. "It puts companies on notice that their relationships with foreign governments, and in particular with foreign militaries, can become the subject of judicial review in the United States," says Elliot Schrage, a former senior vice president of global affairs at the Gap who teaches business strategy and law at Columbia and is a senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations. Companies in the extractive industries—oil, gas and mining—will probably be most affected, since they often agree to have a foreign government's armed forces protect company operations.

"Boards of directors are now on notice that this is a governance issue, too," adds Schrage, who believes the settlement was a prerequisite to ChevronTexaco's merger with Unocal. ChevronTexaco itself is now being sued for alleged complicity in a series of shootings and the destruction of two villages by Nigerian military forces protecting its oil operations in the Niger Delta; without a settlement, Unocal would have doubled ChevronTexaco's potential liability for human rights violations and compounded its public embarrassment. Schrage adds that insurance companies will now also scrutinize more closely clients who do business in countries with repressive governments and abusive militaries. The costs of genocide and slavery insurance could be pretty high.

Catherine Boggs, a partner at the international law firm Baker & McKenzie who advises major oil and mining companies on their overseas operations, agrees that the Unocal case has had a real impact. "Companies will give greater weight to this sort of political risk when they consider going into

some of these countries, and will be more careful about how they do business with them."

The recognition that bad corporate conduct overseas can be costly at home is resonating abroad as well. In France, in 2002, Burmese victims sued officials of Total, Unocal's partner in the Burma pipeline and the fourth-largest oil and gas company in the world. And a case against Texaco charging massive environmental contamination in Ecuador is now in trial there [see Eyal Press, "Texaco on Trial," May 31, 1999]. "European corporate lawyers are very worried about such lawsuits," says Menno Kamminga, an international law professor at Maastricht University in the Netherlands, who advises corporations and human rights organizations. "And NGOs definitely want to bring them."

But if the movement for legal accountability is slowly going

global, so is the pressure to find more oil. World oil consumption is rising dramatically, as is the price per barrel. With countries like China now competing against the major multinationals for drilling rights, the multinationals are under ever greater pressure to pump more oil, more quickly and more cheaply. Historically, that's meant moving into some of the most unstable and politically dicey resource-rich countries in the world.

Ultimately, experts say, only international standards can get all corporations operating overseas to follow the same rules. To that end, the UN is now drafting a set of norms designed to govern transnational companies. But US officials have already indicated they won't support anything that's enforceable. That leaves the standards to be set by the courts—and at the expense of companies that continue to do big business with bad governments. ■

Letter From Beijing by Jehangir S. Pocha

CHINA'S NEW LEFT

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FIRST CLASS

SPECIAL DELIVERY

With its soaring glass towers and giant neon signs, Beijing looks like the new mecca of global capitalism. But behind the glitz there's growing disenchantment with relentless market reforms that have shrunk social services and thrown at least 20 million people out of work. Within intellectual circles, the echo of this disillusionment has become the rallying cry of a group known as China's New Left. This loose coalition comprises leading academics, many of whom have studied in the West and are disenchanted by it. They're challenging China's current market reforms with a simple message: China's failed twentieth-century experiment with Communism cannot be undone in the twenty-first century by embracing nineteenth-century-style laissez-faire capitalism. China is "caught between the two extremes of misguided socialism and crony capitalism, and suffering from the worst of both systems," says Wang Hui, a professor of literature at Beijing's Tsinghua University. His passionate denunciations of China's market reforms in *Du Shu*, a magazine he edits, are partly credited with energizing China's New Left intellectuals. "We have to find an alternate way. This is the great mission of our generation."

Such grand visions notwithstanding, the New Left's adherents don't have a unified ideology beyond the broad brush strokes, or a coherent set of alternate policies. Some are hardliners who find common cause with China's "old" leftists, who remain faithful to Mao's radical "Communism with Chinese characteristics." Though they say they rue the violence of the Maoist years, they remain enchanted with the sociopolitical initiatives of that period, such as collectivization. But the majority of New Left intellectuals are moderates who rec-

ognize that old Communist dogma lies discredited, and who simply want to rein in the excesses of China's market reforms. Their main complaint is that China's export-led growth strategy skews society and allows the fruits of reform to be harvested by urban residents and by government and Communist Party officials.

That criticism resonates increasingly with both discontented workers and peasants. "This is now an unjust society," says Lu She Zhong, 55, a village leader in central Henan province, who's been battling local authorities for six years over unpaid compensation after his entire village was resettled to make way for the giant Xiao Langdi dam on the Yellow River. "I know such projects are important, but why were we cheated in the bargain?" Public anger over illegal demolitions, withheld pensions and corruption led to more than 50,000 protests in 2003, seven times the number from a decade before, according to official reports, including those from the Ministry of Public Security.

But significantly, public security officials and police who used to crack down hard on such protests and blame external forces for trying to destabilize China now apply New Left thinking to explain the causes of the unrest and urge a kinder, gentler response. "Surprising numbers of analysts in the public security system display an undisguised sympathy for the very worker and peasant protestors the police are supposed to suppress," wrote Murray Scot Tanner, senior political scientist at the RAND Corporation in Washington, DC, in an article in the Summer 2004 issue of *Washington Quarterly*. "In their writings, they characterize laid-off demonstrators as 'exploited,' 'marginalized,' 'socially disadvantaged,' 'victims' and 'losers' in economic competition, driven to protest by social distrust and the 'heartlessness' of the free market. They

Jehangir S. Pocha is the Beijing-based China correspondent for the Boston Globe.

frankly concede that many protesters are victims of crooked managers who drove their factories into bankruptcy through illicit dealings or who absconded with company assets."

Indeed, the degree to which the New Left's rhetoric meshes with that of the government's indicates that President Hu Jintao and his team are tacitly supporting the New Left. Part of Hu's motivation is to discredit previous President Jiang Zemin, who committed the country to his awkwardly named "Three Represents" theory. Generally dismissed in the West as a euphemism for Reaganesque trickle-down economics, Jiang's theory is enshrined in China's Constitution, even though it is widely blamed for the deep inequalities gripping the country.

Though China is one of the world's fastest-growing economies, it is also one of the world's most unequal societies. In a country where people used to save for months to buy a Flying Pigeon bicycle, the roads are jammed with gleaming Audis and Buicks. But among them, the unlucky ones who have missed the opportunities that have come with economic reforms still pedal their now-rusty Flying Pigeons. Free access to education and healthcare has been drastically cut, especially in rural areas, and property that was once seized from the rich and redistributed to the poor is being taken from farmers and given to developers.

The argument that these changes were forced by "the discipline of the market" has angered many Chinese, causing party leaders to worry about the nation's stability. Chen Xin, a professor of sociology at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in Beijing and a self-described New Lifter, says Hu realizes he must correct the imbalances created during Jiang's term because while a democracy can balance between extremes by throwing a party or a president who's gone too far out of power, "in a one-party system, the party must have its own self-correcting mechanisms—or else it will lose touch with the people."

Emboldened by such tumult, New Left intellectuals, who have been questioning China's market reforms from the sidelines since the early 1990s, have stepped up their criticism. Wang says it's time for people to understand that China's problems are not merely fallout from market mechanics but the result of "bad policies and bad governance." He and other New Lefters have begun educating the public about the faults they see in China's reforms through a series of well-publicized articles. "The government is more focused on helping export manufacturers than agriculture and rural welfare," which affect far more people, says Cui Zhi Yuan of Tsinghua University, a leading New Left thinker. "[One of] the largest expenditure items in the budget is not education or healthcare but tax rebates to exporters. So essentially the government is returning money to [domestic and multinational] exporters while cutting welfare programs."

With businesspeople now allowed to join the Communist Party, New Left intellectuals are also challenging what Cui calls the growing "nexus between corrupt politicians, bank-

ers and businessmen who in the name of reform are looting China." Though both Wang and Cui say there is no doubt that China's state-owned enterprises (SOEs), which generally lose vast amounts of money every year, need change, they are calling for a process of "institutional renovation" that would allow SOEs to restructure without surrendering ownership or abdicating responsibilities to workers.

Critics of the New Left, such as Professor Shi Yinong, director of the Center for American Studies at the People's University in Beijing, dismiss their talk as fluff and say New Lefters "criticize but have no real alternative" to the current global economic system, based on the Washington Consensus.

While Wang accepts that the major focus of the New Left is constructive criticism, he says a new economic framework is being created. "Just because those

without imagination cannot see it doesn't mean it isn't being formed," he says.

At the core of the New Left's policy recommendations is a focus on what they call the *San Nong* (or Three Nongs): issues concerning the plight of the *Nong Min* (peasants), *Nong Ye* (agriculture) and *Nong Cun* (rural communities). Currently the average annual rural income in China is the equivalent of about \$355, and China's 786 million farmers, who are 70 percent of the population, account for only 39 percent of domestic consumption and hold just 19 percent of all deposits in the country's individual bank accounts, according to government reports. More than 50 million people still live in poverty, according to government figures, and the real number is likely much higher. Cui says that focusing on the *San Nong* will allow China to make the transition from an economy based on foreign direct investment to one based on organic growth and driven by domestic investment, which will raise local salaries and standards of living.

New Left thinkers say their strident criticism, coupled with increasing protests in villages, is succeeding in leading the government to soften some of its earlier policies. For example, China's National People's Congress recently passed a new bankruptcy law that will give primacy to workers' rights when a company goes bust. Financial support to farmers has also increased, and now fewer migrate to cities looking for work as daily wage earners. That's shrinking China's pool of cheap labor and upsetting factory owners. But championing such causes and arguing in favor of development that is "less GDP-focused and more people-focused" is what the New Left sees as its immediate role, says Cui.

Still, dissent is a delicate business in China, and sociology professor Chen Xin is quick to point out that the New Left's concern "is not politics but social welfare. We're only amplifying what we see happening around us. Hopefully, that will aid and guide the government." With the Chinese government congenitally opposed to any sort of unsanctioned organization, Wang also emphasizes that "we're not a group...just a loose affiliation of people with similar beliefs." He adds, "Even the term 'New Left' is not ours. It was first used to

The argument that economic changes were forced by the discipline of the market' has angered many Chinese.

discredit us and to portray us as the old socialists. But I don't really mind. When something new is happening, it's normal for people to try to define it in old terms."

If Wang's benevolence toward his labelers seems magnanimous, it is partly because the "left" label has begun to work in favor of the intellectuals. "I've been reading some New Left articles, and they make me feel very warm because they remind me of the values my parents used to talk to me about," says Maria Zhang, 24, a student at the Beijing Forestry University. "I feel like China has lost its bearing by bending too much toward Western ways. We're out of touch with our past and core values."

With such sentiments increasing, President Hu, who took over from Jiang two years ago, has brought a different tone to decision-making in Beijing. His government has said it will look beyond GDP growth to address such issues as environmental decay, regional inequality and unemployment. Lu, the village leader in Henan, dismisses this as "only words" to mollify restive groups. But Chen says rhetoric is always the first step toward change in China. "That sets the national mood," he says. "Then there are some broad changes in policy and then, over many years, detailed changes in governance and implementation of laws. Right now, I think we are already at the second stage." Indeed, Hu is currently overseeing a massive reshuffle of officials and replacing older and discredited

officials with a younger generation of technocrats.

But even Hu's public indications that he intends to steer China more toward a German-style socially responsive state doesn't entirely satisfy Cui. "The truth is that even the Western left's policies [like progressive taxes] are only reactive and aimed at correcting imbalances caused by a capitalistic system," he says. "Our ultimate goal should be to develop a new theory of poverty and an independent society where such massive imbalances do not occur in the first place."

Despite his seemingly anti-Western stance, Cui, whose school works closely with Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government, admits that most of the essential principles the New Left is advocating have come from the West: full-cost pricing (which passes on the costs of environmental and health damages caused by products to their manufacturers); full financial disclosure (which reins in potentially destabilizing financial tools such as hedge funds); dismantling of tax loopholes and havens (in countries like Switzerland); new definitions of patents, copyrights and royalties (which emphasize their productive use rather than restricting ownership); and new salary schemes (which emphasize wages plus a share in profits). That these principles are still not widely accepted even in the West doesn't daunt him. "China is finding itself," he says. "We have a new will to build a certain kind of society—a better society." ■

LETTERS

C O N T I N U E D

(Continued From Page 2)

that meant it didn't appear in print anywhere, it showed up on all sorts of sites online: *Slate*, Daily Kos and many smaller blogs that don't generally run cartoons but linked to mine because it made an important point. Net effect: one less left-oriented voice on mainstream editorial pages.

SCOTT BATEMAN

Northampton, Mass.

■ Thank you, thank you, *thank you* for the incredibly incisive "Smile, Terri" cover. As a subscriber, I am gratified that the editors chose to rise above all the various cheap, standard, ultrareactionary arguments of the Schiavo spectacle and direct us instead to the deeper, more complicated human mystery of this appalling episode. And as one who avidly followed news of the case throughout, with a whole range of conflicting emotions about it, I'm even more gratified that *The Nation* went with a rarity: the philosopher's view. Whichever side one chose in the non-Terri-centered political imbroglio, and however achingly personal the issues involved might be to some, there is one fact upon which all must agree: Terri Schiavo was, for everyone but the brilliant author of this cover, a pawn. In its exquisite irony, in its redefining as iconic art the otherwise revolting replay of Mrs. Schiavo's most recent televised image, Eric Fischl's cover was actually the most authentically respectful and loving interpretation of Terri Schiavo's fate. Only Fischl got the "us" in her and, so somber-

ly, the "us" in all the "them"s who sought to define her for their own purposes. Bravo.

LESLIE ANN FULLER

Minneapolis

■ Eric Fischl's sobering meditation on the Schiavo case was about the only thing I saw in the media that shed any light on that utterly sad ordeal. It was the best American political art since Richard Serra detoured one of Goya's Black Paintings to show Bush Devouring Everything in the back-cover ad you ran last summer.

I suspect, though, that like Serra's piece, Fischl's cover will generate the same predictable storm of outrage: "As a longtime *Nation* reader *blah blah* unbelievably tasteless *blah blah* what were you *blah* thinking *blah*? Do you want the Republican right to win *blah*?" Which would be unfortunate, of course, because the time is way past for pompous pieties. We need the carefully measured, coldly uninflected truth of work such as Fischl's to *épater* every last over-mediatized bourgeoisie among us. The bloated Sacred Cow has become the new Trojan Horse, hiding a politics of cynicism, which cunningly exploits our stubborn insistence on the sentimental values of social nostalgia. Young talents like Eminem and the *South Park* creators have realized this.

That Fischl was able to achieve the same outraged response to our new religion of cultural hypocrisy, without vulgarity, I found inspiring. The drawing was brilliant, touchingly beatific; leave it to a great artist to insist on reappro-

priating religious iconography from the boors who claim to speak in its name. Fischl's double-gesture was profound: using that compellingly rendered image of Ms. Schiavo to preserve her last shred of dying humanity, while his words bemoan our culture's brain-dead morality.

America is on some serious life-support, all right; and if, as I fear, the major reaction to this last-gasp-of-common-sense cover is knee-jerk outrage, it might be time to pull the plug.

GEOFFREY SIRC

FISCHL REPLIES

New York City

■ Terri Schiavo's unfortunate, senseless facial expression became the mirror for everyone's political, social and religious agendas. No one was spared this disgusting spectacle. No interest group was innocent of projecting its own interpretations, its own urgency, its own meaning onto her unresponsive face.

For those who felt deeply that this was and should have been a private tragedy, I couldn't agree more. But it was *not* private. It was an unrelenting and inescapable public event. I was horrified by how she was being used by the government, the antiabortionists, the Creationists, the media and politicians (right and left). My piece simply showed the mirroring. Judging from most of the responses *The Nation* has been receiving, people are continuing to see only what they want to see in it.

ERIC FISCHL

BOOKS & THE ARTS

Flyboy in the Buttermilk

ARTHUR C. DANTO

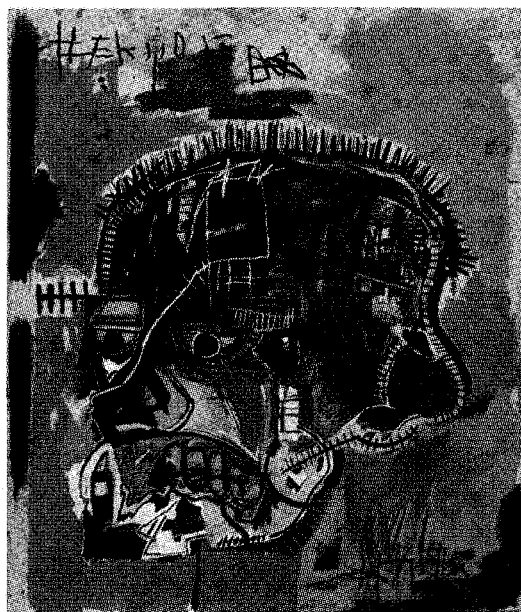
I can safely say that Jean scoffed at the term graffiti when applied to himself. —Rene Ricard

The creative period of New York graffiti art lasted for about a decade, beginning with the appearance all over Upper West Side walls and sidewalks of “TAKI 183” in 1971 and culminating, around 1980, in the realization of spectacular works by individual masters that covered the sides of subway cars. The artists called themselves “writers,” and their primary works were alphanumeric signatures, or “tags,” executed in fonts of singular originality, occasionally illuminated with vernacular images poached from comics or from recent art history. I suppose the closest analogy would be the creation of intricate capital letters by Celtic scribes in such works as the Book of Kells. Seldom has a movement gone so far so fast. The illustrations in a book like *The Faith of Graffiti*, published in 1974, show tags that have evolved well beyond TAKI 183, but scarcely prepare one for the baroque splendor of those in Martha Cooper and Henry Chalfant’s 1984 edited collection *Subway Art*, most of which were executed around 1980. *Subway Art* ends with an inscribed rap epitaph by the writer Lee Quinones in relatively straightforward lettering: “There was once a time when the Lexington was a beautiful line/When children of the ghetto expressed with art, not with crime....”

The centrality of the signature is easily grasped, since the primary goal of graffiti was “getting fame,” and the subway car—or “burner”—offered a billboard-size surface with the added advantage of mobility. Glory consisted in the abrupt emergence of one’s freshly painted tag from a tunnel’s darkness onto a viaduct, like the one across 125th Street. The primary audience consisted of other writers, who knew one’s identity, appreciated the dangers involved in “getting up” and admired the artistry and originality of one’s achievement. In a recent letter, Tony Silver—who made a wonderful documentary with Chalfant, *Style Wars*—wrote, “I liked the idea that the transgressive writers with no consciousness of the art world had taken over public space as vandals with their tags and

burners, and discovered they could be artists, creating their own canon.”

When I asked Silver why Jean-Michel Basquiat, who was something of a *graffitero* in the early 1980s, was not included among the writers in his film, he said that he could not fit him in. Despite the fact that Basquiat worked as a street artist for a time and even had a tag—SAMO—he viewed himself, from the outset, as a fine artist, and the unprecedented art world of



Untitled (Head), 1981

the 1980s rightly accepted him on his own terms, though the outlaw aura of graffiti probably abetted his meteoric ascent. By 1984 some of the writers were trying to cross over into the gallery scene, but it proved impossible to sustain the energy that had made them underground stars. Basquiat, however, flourished in the downtown art world. In May of that same year,

THE ELI AND EDYTHE L. BROAD COLLECTION, LOS ANGELES

he had his first one-person show at Mary Boone, one of the hottest galleries of that moment, and was included in "An International Survey of Recent Painting and Sculpture," with which the Museum of Modern Art inaugurated its 1984 reopening. He had re-created on canvas the visceral excitement other writers achieved only in the rail yards of the MTA.

Though writing was an important feature of Basquiat's art, he is closer to Cy Twombly than to CRASH or DAZE, who showed at the Sidney Janis Gallery in 1984. Graffiti, even at its most inspired, really belongs to the visual culture of the early 1980s, whereas Basquiat's work, for all its graffiti gestures, belongs with the art of that decade. And while he sought fame as eagerly as the uptown writers, he was after the kind of recognition that the establishment alone confers, not the ephemeral celebration of co-conspirators in an underground network. Moreover, fame was not the substance of his art, as it was in the art of the writers. Like artists in any period, he was concerned with what Hegel would call the highest needs of the spirit. Basquiat's painting was close to the best the art world had to offer in his day, and his achievement only grows more impressive with time, as is evident in the powerful retrospective of his work at the Brooklyn Museum, a short walk from where he grew up. The show is up through June 5, after which it goes to the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles (July 17–October 10) and the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston (November 18–February 12, 2006).

Contrary to popular legend, Basquiat was anything but an outsider artist, and indeed much of what was most distinctive in his work came from the recent avant-garde rather than from the streets. Among his most important influences was Cy Twombly, whose work on paper, still on view at the Whitney Museum, I addressed in my last column ["American Graffiti," March 21]. As Richard Marshall observed in the catalogue to the exhibition of Basquiat's work he organized for the Whitney in 1992, "From Cy Twombly, Basquiat took license and instruction on how to draw, scribble, write, collage, and paint simultaneously."

In a conversation for *Interview* with the late Henry Geldzahler, former curator of contemporary art at the Metropolitan Museum, Basquiat identified as his "favorite Twombly" the 1975 *Apollo and the Artist*, which features a big "Apollo" written across it. *Apollo and the Artist* is in

the Whitney show, and it is interesting to compare it with Basquiat's *CPRKR* in the Brooklyn show. Where Twombly wrote "Apollo" in large letters in blue wax crayon across the top of his piece, Basquiat drew "CPRKR" in big, loose letters with black paint stick across the top of his. Twombly's piece has the feeling of an elegy, with a crude flower drawn at the base. Basquiat's is a memorial tablet for one of his greatest heroes, Charlie Parker. Beneath the name he drew a three-point crown, a fre-

Basquiat's work was close to the best the art world had to offer in his day, and his achievement only grows more impressive with time.

quent symbol in his work, flanked with two black smears. Below that he wrote STANHOPE HOTEL/APRIL SECOND/NINETEEN FIFTYTHREE FIVE—an allusion to the hotel where Parker would die on March 12, 1955. (As Basquiat explained, "I cross out words so you will see them more; the fact that they are obscured makes you want to read them.") There is a simple cross under that, above the inscription CHARLES THE FIRST. And across the bottom several bold black swipes of paint, which almost certainly evoke Franz Kline, also "one of my favorites," he told Geldzahler.

I have no great interest in the idea of influence, which is, as Michael Baxandall wrote, the "curse of art criticism." I emphasize the way in which Basquiat broadly "took license and instruction" from Twombly (and Kline), less as an exercise in what Baxandall calls "inferential art criticism" than to modulate the temptation to situate his work in black vernacular culture. It was characteristic of Basquiat not merely to think of Parker in terms of Apollo—the god of music and poetry (Twombly wrote "poetry music" under Apollo's name)—but also in terms of history, calling him Charles the First. He uses that as the title of a companion work, made when he was 22. In the lower left corner of *Charles the First* and across two of its three panels he wrote MOST YOUNG KINGS GET THEIR HEAD CUT OFF. In the upper part of the central panel, the cross appears beneath some dates, again alluding to Parker's death. But certain motifs (the crown, crudely drawn hands) and certain words (among others, HALLOES, FEET, THOR, OPERA, CHEROKEE) are loosely inscribed, together with some numbers and the word COPYRIGHT and the symbol ©, over the three panels. Despite the scribbling, the scrawling, the smearing

and the playful misspellings, the overall feeling of *Charles the First* is the certainty, authority, boldness and graphic confidence that, more than any particular set of images or symbols, mark Basquiat's art. And while I would not attempt to work out the iconography of the piece, it bears out Basquiat's claim that his subject was "royalty, heroism and the streets." It is a tribute to a hero, a king of jazz, in a constellation of symbols that evokes a schoolyard wall on which different hands have drawn or written different things.

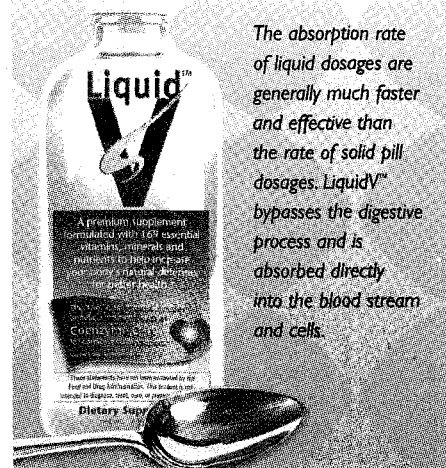
Basquiat's heroes were black sports stars such as Joe Louis, Sugar Ray Robinson, Jack Johnson and Muhammad Ali, and jazz musicians like Parker, Miles Davis and Dizzy Gillespie, though in terms of the number of works dedicated to him, Charles the First reigns supreme. These range from the stark *Now's the Time*—in the form of a black phonograph record, ninety-two and a half inches in diameter, with Parker's tune "Now's the Time" scribbled in white paint over "PRKR"—to works consisting largely of lists, like *Discography*, written in white against a black background, with the names of Parker's fellow bebop revolutionaries (Miles Davis, Max Roach and the others) as well as the names of pieces recorded on "NOV. 26, 1945." The use of lists is another Twomblyism. A wonderful example is *Jawbone of an Ass*, in which what may be a crude self-portrait as Rodin's *Thinker* occupies a space in the upper left corner and surveys a scroll of historical names, including Achilles, Sappho, Cleopatra, Anaxagoras, Aristophanes, Sophocles, Socrates, Alexander the Great, down to Harrison, Tyler, Transcendentalism and Perry—with, again, a crude drawing in the lower right corner of a black figure saying "Yup!" and hitting ("Bip") a white figure with "Grrr" in a thought balloon over his head. It is, in my view, less a cartoon of racial strife, or even of the black specter haunting the white imagination, than a symbol of history as a pageant of war, since the scroll lists so many ancient battles and famous heroes—Hannibal, Hamilcar, Scipio, Alexander the Great, Spartacus, Julius Caesar. These are not the kinds of names that turn up on burners.

"If Cy Twombly and Jean Dubuffet had a baby and gave it up for adoption," Rene Ricard quipped, "it would be Jean-Michel." What this omits is the place of blackness in Basquiat's art, as well as in his life, and in the complex relationship between the two. Basquiat himself did not shy away from the subject of race. In

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a 1985 profile for *The New York Times Magazine* published under the title "New Art, New Money: The Marketing of an American Artist," Basquiat said that he included so many people of color in his paintings because "I didn't see many paintings with black people in them." His father, Gérard Basquiat, an accountant, was Haitian, and his mother, Matilde, who had an interest in fashion design, was Puerto Rican. The family lived a middle-class life in Park Slope, Brooklyn, where, for a time, Jean-Michel attended St. Ann's, a private Catholic school with a progressive curriculum. His early interest in drawing was encouraged at home. When he was recovering from an accident, Matilde gave him a copy of *Gray's Anatomy*, which became the source for the anatomical drawings that were so much a part of his artistic vocabulary. Thanks to Matilde, who often took him to the Metropolitan Museum and the Brooklyn Museum, he had an unusually rich museum background. "The art," he said, "came from her."

Yet he never traveled in an exclusively black world, and his introduction to art does not seem to have come through black painters like Jacob Lawrence or Romare Bearden. His downtown milieu was chiefly white, and though he resented the scarcity of blacks and the art world's subtle undercurrents of racism (one painting on display is entitled *Obnoxious Liberals*), he seems to have flourished in the scene—the galleries, the clubs, the parties. He had a band called Gray, which played at the Mudd Club and CBGB, he was a great dancer and he had many white girlfriends, including Madonna. Lizzie Himmel's photograph of him for the cover of *The New York Times Magazine* shows him barefoot, in a paint-stained Armani suit and necktie, peering out with sulky curiosity. There is a black figure in the painting next to him, somewhat fetal in shape, with two long rows of many white teeth. In the eyes of New York's mostly white art world, Basquiat was exotically handsome, a black bohemian prince.

The downtown art world of the 1980s had undergone a dramatic reconfiguration by the time Basquiat arrived on the scene. Painting, which had been marginalized in the 1970s, had enjoyed a resurgence as part of a world movement then known as Neo-Expressionism. Neo-Expressionist paintings were brushy, urgent, figurative and, not least, very large. Since the immense demand for the Abstract Expressionist canvases of the New York School was raising prices to unprecedented heights, the very size of the paint-

ings of Julian Schnabel, David Salle and others enhanced their value to collectors. Artists who painted big canvases began to live suitably big, opulent lives. Basquiat's brilliantly splashy work merged perfectly with the new ethos, and the fact that he painted in designer suits, rather than the working-class bluejeans and flannel shirts of an earlier generation, embodied the shift in self-perception. Basquiat became typical of the spoiled American artist that Tama Janowitz wrote about in *Slaves of New York*. His pals were Keith Haring, Kenny Scharf and especially Andy Warhol, who became his mentor. There is a wonderful double portrait of himself with Warhol, *Dos Cabezas*—another painting from 1982, perhaps his best year. The two artists are shown side by side, but in different spaces. Warhol cuts a meditative profile in his white wig, looking out through one green eye. Basquiat shows himself like a golliwog, with wild black hair. Interestingly, there is no lettering.

Whether because of Basquiat's race or the uncertainty of his association with graffiti, the official art establishment was leery of him. Relatively few of his works are in public collections. Critics in the 1980s generated rarified theories to deal with Salle's disjunctive canvases, which were believed to express

something about the fractured reality of the external world. Or they speculated that Julian Schnabel's fragmented, sharded compositions expressed something deep about the mind and the world's disorder. Basquiat ended up being critically ghettoized, discussed in ethnic rather than philosophical terms. To some extent this is still true today. I had not, I must confess, especially gone out of my way to see his work until after his death in 1988, when I finally went down to see a show assembled by his first dealer, Anina Nosei. It then struck me that nobody had really looked at the work. Basquiat's gift, I realized, was like Pollock's—brilliant, daring, impulsive. None of the hot artists of his moment in the 1980s could touch him. He alone transcended the fevered period he epitomized.

He did not survive his decade. He made a lot of money, which he spent lavishly on drugs. He had a terrible heroin addiction. One of his last works, on brown canvas, is called *Riding With Death*. A brown and black equestrian figure sits astride a horse skeleton. There are crosses in the eyeholes of the horse's skull. "Horse," of course, is slang for heroin, which transports the rider out of the world, with his arms spread out in a gesture of helplessness. Basquiat was 27 when he died. ■

Patrimony

JOHN PALATTELLA

Five years ago an enterprising poet named Kevin Young edited an anthology called *Giant Steps: The New Generation of African American Writers*, which he packed with impressive work by writers such as Hilton Als, Edwidge Danticat and Joe Wood. Young wanted to update *The New Negro* anthology, that

touchstone of the Harlem Renaissance, for the hip-hop generation, and he undertook the project in a spirit of reverence. "I see it as the writer's job, especially the African-American writer's job, not to 'kill the literary father' but rather to celebrate our ancestry," he explained in the book's introduction. It's understandable that Young would not want to look back to the past in anger since, for African-American writers, killing the literary father has often meant getting tangled up in fights over the proper way to "represent the race" (think of James Baldwin's attacks on Richard

John Palattella writes about poetry for *The Nation* and other publications.

BOOKS DISCUSSED IN THIS ESSAY

BLACK MARIA.

By Kevin Young. Knopf. 241 pp. \$24.95.

MOST WAY HOME.

By Kevin Young. William Morrow. 100 pp. \$20.

TO REPEL GHOSTS.

By Kevin Young. Zoland. 350 pp. \$17.95.

JELLY ROLL: A BLUES.

By Kevin Young. Knopf. 190 pp. \$15.

GIANT STEPS: The New Generation of African American Writers.

Edited by Kevin Young. HarperCollins. 364 pp. Out of print.

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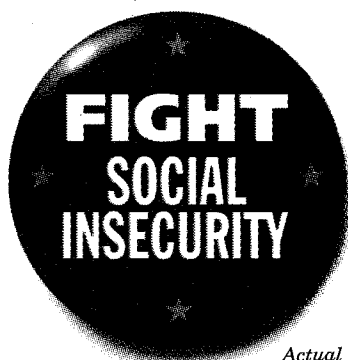
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Wright in "Everybody's Protest Novel" and "Many Thousands Gone"). Young's decision to avoid the zero-sum game of patricide, then, is as much political as aesthetic. In a "post-soul society," Young explains in *Giant Steps*, "the essentialist and often easy answers to questions of race—which have never been easy; just ask Bert Williams or Paul Robeson or Josephine Baker or Muhammad (Ali, that is)—are as complicated as ever. In recognizing the diversity of 'the black experience,' the poets here ask: Where do Shaft and Langston Hughes meet?"

That's a good question, and it raises another: Can Shaft and Langston Hughes be made to meet? In other words, how can Young talk about celebrating one's entire ancestry—let alone knowing it—without resorting to empty provocation? That's not an unreasonable question, especially since Young knows better. His first book of poems, *Most Way Home*, is an unsentimental portrait of postwar life in the Deep South. A key poem is "The Preserving," and while it concerns the seasonal ritual of canning, it also delicately evokes the complex chemistry involved in any act of preservation:

One Thanksgiving, while saying grace
we heard what sounded like a gunshot
ran to the back porch to see
peach glass everywhere. Reckon
someone didn't give the jar enough
room to breathe.

Young's work as a preservationist has garnered much critical acclaim. In 1993 *Most Way Home* was selected by Lucille Clifton for publication as part of the National Poetry Series. *To Repel Ghosts*, a manic epic about the painter Jean-Michel Basquiat, appeared in 2001 and was named a finalist for the James McLaughlin Prize from the Academy of American Poets. Two years later Young published *Jelly Roll*, a blues-tinged breakup book that was a finalist for the National Book Award—and his first book with a big trade press. It also landed Young on the cover of *Poets & Writers*, which published a profile of him by Colson Whitehead, a contributor to *Giant Steps*.

Young's new book, *Black Maria*, tells another breakup story in verse, this time by reverentially drawing on the wiseguy tones and bleak settings of film noir. But Young's homage to film noir doesn't translate into good poetry. *Black Maria* is a bland mannerist exercise—a remade ready-made. Reading the book, one can't help but wonder if Young's preservation-

ist impulse has spoiled his poetry, and whether the only way for him to reinvigorate his art would be to pack his jars so they explode.

Young's first two books revealed a poet of talent and ambition, though not in the same proportion. *Most Way Home*, which Young wrote when he was an undergraduate, is a short, sturdy collection of lyric poems loosely based on stories passed along by Young's Louisiana relatives. First books by young poets can be dreary, especially if they focus on deceased kin. Usually the poet zeroes in on a fetish object (such as Grandpa's photo album), swaddling it in layers of ambivalent nostalgia and relinquishing it after experiencing a tiny epiphany. Young mostly avoided this trap by writing a personal history that is not explicitly autobiographical. Inspired by Rita Dove's Pulitzer Prize-winning collection of poems *Thomas and Beulah* (1986), in which Dove uses the lives of her grandparents to dramatize the midcentury northern migration of American blacks, Young uses family anecdotes to flesh out a history of deprivation and endurance in the Jim Crow South. Like Dove, Young focuses on the underside of history, the dramas of everyday people circumscribed by big events. The subjects of *Most Way Home* are generic—the seasons, sickness, death—and Young kindles them to life by using the elliptical resources of lyric poetry to score the clipped rhythms of vernacular speech:

Broke as we were, we didn't need
fixing. But that autumn the men
weighed down our porch, sweating
in their suits, hats-in-hand,
we answered.

To Repel Ghosts seems like an entirely different kind of book. More than 300 pages long and comprising five sections organized as "album sides," it left behind the shotgun houses and mason jars of the postwar Louisiana countryside for the grubby lofts and cocaine-fueled parties of the New York City art world of the 1980s. The inspiration of *To Repel Ghosts* is Jean-Michel Basquiat, a protean figure of that era's downtown punk and art scenes. Born in Brooklyn in 1960 to a Haitian father and a Puerto Rican mother and dubbed "The Radiant Child" by Rene Ricard in *Artforum* in 1981, Basquiat painted huge, color-drenched canvases that, at their best, blended contradictory styles and elements—primitive and urbane, image and text—to generate an insouciant pop

energy. That energy continues to mesmerize young artists, especially black ones. In his profile of Young, Colson Whitehead recalls lifting some text from a Basquiat painting—PAY FOR SOUP/BUILD A FORT/SET THAT ON FIRE.—and putting it in his first attempt at a novel “as some graffiti on a wall, but it was so much better than anything else in the book that I had to take it out.” Young and Whitehead share more than admiration for Basquiat. Like John Henry, the nineteenth-century steel driver whose legend is the center of Whitehead’s novel *John Henry Days*, Basquiat functions not as a character as much as a medium, one through which Young draws the lives of other African-American artists (Billie Holiday, Charlie Parker, Lester Young, Robert Johnson) into a shattered mural of twentieth-century American life.

Yet for all its narrative sprawl, *To Repel Ghosts* closely follows the plot of *Most Way Home*, telling the story of fugitives trying to wrest a sense of place and dignity from a hostile world. The up-from-Jim-Crow story told in *Most Way Home* is framed by the lyric “Reward,” a description of two runaway slaves. In the opening pages of *To Repel Ghosts*, we find Jean-Michel Basquiat moving out of his parents’ Brooklyn apartment, wallpapering lower Manhattan with graffiti and painting in a dingy basement, which, as Young writes in the book’s first poem, Andy Warhol called “a nigger’s loft—/not The Factory.” Elsewhere Young lambastes art-world glitterati for romanticizing Basquiat as a black primitive: “Intro’d/from the dark/continent—African//Killer B—deadly—” begins “The Pictures,” an attack on Julian Schnabel’s biopic *Basquiat*.

Young, however, has no qualms about romanticizing Basquiat himself. The second “album side” features a profile of Jack Johnson, the first black heavyweight champion of the world and one of several famous black athletes painted by Basquiat. Young uses the Johnson profile to suggest that the painter admired the boxer because he too was a black man who fought epic battles on canvas. Curiously, while Young portrays Johnson with a series of vivid monologues that convey the boxer’s wit, tenderness and pride, none of the poems that focus on Basquiat are monologues; they are all third-person affairs. This could be construed as a commentary on Basquiat’s elusiveness, but Young’s representation of the painter suggests otherwise. As *To Repel Ghosts*

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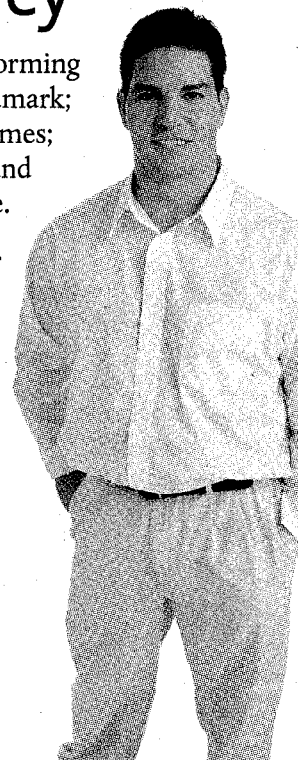
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wears on, Basquiat is depicted as a victim of menacing forces (the white, decadent art world) and toxic habits (heroin), and in their grip his life becomes a slow-motion death. Young's Basquiat has no inner demons, let alone interiority, which allows Young to install Basquiat in a romantic pantheon of doped-up hipster superheroes. With Young's reverence of Basquiat comes a lack of curiosity that sometimes reduces the painter to a cliché of degradation.

Still, Young has a keen appreciation of Basquiat's chaty, wry and even cynically neo-primitivist style. Young abandons the colloquial rhythms of *Most Way Home* for tercets made from very short, unrhymed lines that gain an elastic power from being heavily enjambed. Each tercet is a cluster of syn-copated phrases that snap past the reader, and as the sounds and images of the tercets tumble together and fly apart, it's as though Young had become locked in a battle royal with Basquiat's busy paintings. From "Defacement (1983)":

Basquiat scrawls
& scribbles, clots
paint across

the back
wall of Keith Haring's
Cable Building studio—

two cops, keystoneed,
pounding a beat,
pummel

a black face—scape
goat, sarcophagus—
uniform-blue

with sticks

Young's tercets aren't consistently lively. Some of his poems have monotonous rhythms, while others are overstuffed with details of Basquiat's life. More debilitating are Young's strained attempts to be witty: "Put out/to pasteur—/Quart cartons//of lost children." This is the sound of a poet growing too pleased with his own words.

"There's always something a little funny in all our disasters," James Baldwin once said, "if one can face the disaster." In *To Repel Ghosts*, Young's romanticization of Basquiat short-circuits a serious reckoning with the wreckage of the painter's life. The kind of lackluster wordplay that mars parts of *To Repel Ghosts* is very prominent in *Jelly Roll*, and instead of focusing on the face of disaster, this sloppy language obscures it. The book is filled with luke-

warm puns—"Hottentot to trot//you are not"—and clunky metaphors: "You burn me/at both ends, send//the geese bumping/within my skin."

Even when Young is not trying to be cunning, his language is often careless. "Intermezzo" begins: "Lately I head down/ to the river//& watch what washes/past: garbage//boats, tugs, occasional/sail." To say that boats and tugs wash by is not an impossible usage, but in "Intermezzo" it is not apt. The image of garbage washing

With Young's reverence of Basquiat comes a lack of curiosity that sometimes reduces the painter to a cliché of degradation.

past makes sense, but how, in that context, can a boat wash past? It's unclear whether this peculiar usage reflects the state of mind of the speaker, who is sorting through a breakup. If the word choice is a sign of the speaker's emotional confusion, then why is the language in the rest of the poem unambiguous?

The blues aren't existential in *Jelly Roll*. Instead of plumbing the tension between the sting of disaster and its solace, many poems in *Jelly Roll* play-vamp at the blues. Here's "Cheer," which appears just after the speaker has thrown himself into a passionate affair with a woman:

I am
a stadium!

your cheerleader
sans underwear

half-
time lover

back door man
leave your

little porch light on

Like the poem's speaker, Young's language cries, *Look at me, look at me.*

Black Maria is an even more disappointing production than *Jelly Roll*. In five sections of lyric poems called "reels," Young tells the noir-inflected saga of A.K.A. Jones, a private dick who drinks and smokes his way through the mazes of a city called Shadowtown in pursuit of an ingenue named Delilah Redbone, a country girl who has moved to the city to sing her way to fame and fortune. As Jones and Redbone elude, seduce and betray each other, they cross paths with a cast of noir types: the Killer, the Boss, the Snitch, the McGuffin.

It's no surprise that Young has gravi-

tated to noir, since the genre can accommodate his passion for pop culture and the blues story of romance and betrayal. But by choosing noir Young has also set himself a tough challenge. Whether they are pop songs or detective flicks, genre productions stand or fall on their style. Because its plot twists, situations and character types are terribly familiar, a genre piece is engrossing only if its style has pungency and vitality, evidence that the writer has temporarily transmuted a genre into his or her own way of thinking.

Young doesn't meet that challenge, and one stumbling point is the plot of *Black Maria*. Filled with wild tangents and shifts in point of view, the narrative is fractured and confusing, a state of affairs meant to echo a bewildering noir story such as *The Big Sleep*. But unlike that film, *Black Maria* isn't intriguing. Young tries to repair this problem by beginning each "reel" with an epigraph and voiceover that summarize the section's plot, but that device only compounds the book's fractures.

Another weakness is the book's language. Jones's and Redbone's fast-talking monologues are derailed by the same kind of bad puns that fill *Jelly Roll*. "Slant hat, broad/back, my entrenched coat//of fog" is how Jones describes himself when Redbone first saunters into his office. *Black Maria* isn't without a few cutting lines—at one point a jealous Jones mutters, "She made her bed/nor everyone lies in it"—but such witty moments can't carry the book.

As with *Jelly Roll*, the longueurs of *Black Maria* aren't necessarily the result of carelessness. Rather, they signal that Young's preoccupation with looking back in reverence has become paralyzing instead of fructifying. In a sense, each of Young's four poetry collections has been a debut book, with the poet venerating a genre (family melodrama, the blues, film noir) or an iconic personality (Basquiat) steeped in cultural history. Basquiat himself painted tributes to jazz musicians and other black figures, but in those portraits he also treated his subjects ironically. He knew that the difference between reverence and reverence amounts to more than one consonant, which is why his romps through various styles and genres were more antic than innocuous. Kevin Young grasped that lesson in *To Repel Ghosts*, even if he didn't perfect it. The only mystery left unsolved in *Black Maria* is why he has forgotten it. ■

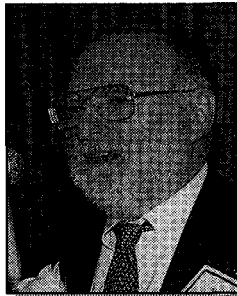
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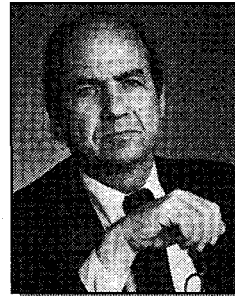
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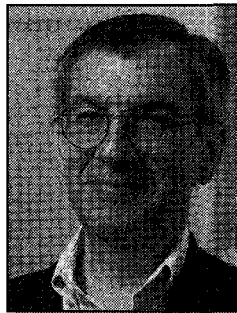
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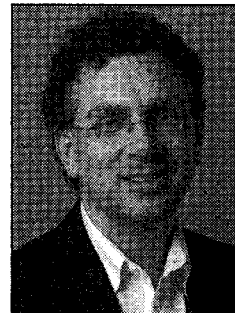
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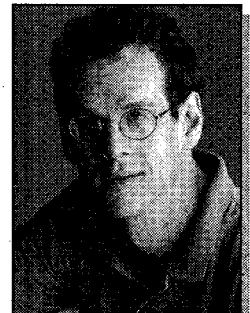
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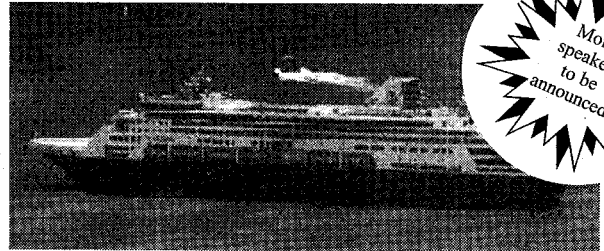
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OBITUARY

Bellow's Lonely Planet

LEE SIEGEL

Toward the end of his 1989 novella, *A Theft*, Saul Bellow—who died on April 5 at the age of 89—has Clara Velde, the tale's protagonist, describe the perceptual stages she's passed through in her life: "Stage one: Everybody is kindly, basically good; you treat 'em right, they'll treat you right—

that's baby time. Stage two: Everybody's a brute, butcher, barbarian, rapist, crook, liar, killer and monster. Stage three: Cynicism also is unacceptable, and you begin to put together an improved judgment based on minimal leads or certain selected instances...."

That approximately characterizes my responses to Bellow's work over the years, beginning with rapt devouring of his every word, as though his fiction were wisdom-writing on the order of the Bible or the Bhagavad-Gita. This personal attachment to Bellow's art gave way to something like personal hurt when I was confounded by his disgust with contemporary life and contemporary people, if not with life itself. And, finally, there was a calm, grateful, less personal acceptance of Bellow's precious artistic blessing, along with resignation to the absurdity of his lacerating intellectual curse.

In his scorn for just about every aspect of the "contemporary scene," Bellow sometimes joined the company of enigmas with authoritarian leanings, like Yeats, Lawrence, Céline and Eliot, and just plain social creeps, like Woolf, Forster and Larkin. American versions of these genius-monsters are rare. Bellow's dark philosophical moods are what defined him as the most European of American novelists, though he is often celebrated—especially by British writers—as the epitome of American literary exuberance. But Bellow was really a nationally unfiliated free agent who exuberantly used European lines and pulleys to get America under control of his imagination, just as he wielded an American idiom to throw off any claim that Europe might have had on his creative will. It was this very insistence on his sovereign autonomy that lies at the heart of Bellow's darkness and disdain.

The Adventures of Augie March (1954), considered by many to be Bellow's most American book, is actually his declaration of independence from both America

and Europe. This magnificent picaresque tale ends with its hero standing at the edge of the North Sea, on the beach at Dunkirk, "where the British were so punished" as they fled the invading Nazis and then waited to be evacuated. Yet no one is driving Augie off the continent. He is the lordly American postwar traveler, enjoying the abeyance of European influence.

Strangely, though, he has no plans to go back to America. "Why, I am a sort of Columbus of those near-at-hand," he muses in the book's famous final lines, "and believe you can come to them in this immediate *terra incognita* that spreads out in every gaze. I may well be a flop at this line of endeavor. Columbus too thought he was a flop, probably, when they sent him back in chains. Which didn't prove there was no America." And which didn't prove there was, since America had yet to be invented, and still has yet to be summed up by history. The shrewd double negative confers on Bellow's hero an absolute freedom from place. He is an "Isolato," the term coined by Melville in *Moby-Dick* for those "not acknowledging the common continent of men, but each Isolato living on a separate continent of his own." Augie's homeland, and Bellow's too, is the *terra incognita* of the character's, and the author's, singular will and imagination.

In novel after novel, Bellow put his protagonists through an infinite regression of detachment from places, ideas, qualities of experience. He cuts them loose from every clinging, mortal thing—this is the essence of his creativity. In *Humboldt's Gift* (1975), Charlie Citrine rhapsodizes about his ideal state of being, the "single self, independently conscious, proud of its detachment and its absolute immunity, its stability and its power to remain unaffected by anything whatsoever.... For to be fully conscious of oneself as an individual is also to be separated from all else."

Bellow so precisely captures and notates physical existence only to transcend it. He is not, in fact, a realist at all. No one ever looked like the con man Tamkin in *Seize the Day* (1956): "His bones were peculiarly formed, as though twisted twice where the ordinary human bone was turned only once, and his shoulders rose in two pagodalike points." These are literal details fringed with expanding wonder; they make the familiar world suddenly give way to *terra incognita*. With the exception of *Humboldt's Gift*, Bellow's heroes are always, by novel's end, alone on their separate continent, physically, emotionally or spiritually "separated from all else."

By the time of *Humboldt's Gift*, Bellow's evocations of the physical world had become almost surreal: "the clothesline sur-rendered the pith of its soul." From then on, you barely get any description at all. Citrine's confession that for him the veil of Maya "is wearing out, like a roller-towel in a Mexican men's room" is both a lament and a victory cry. Bellow was dispensing with the physical world altogether.

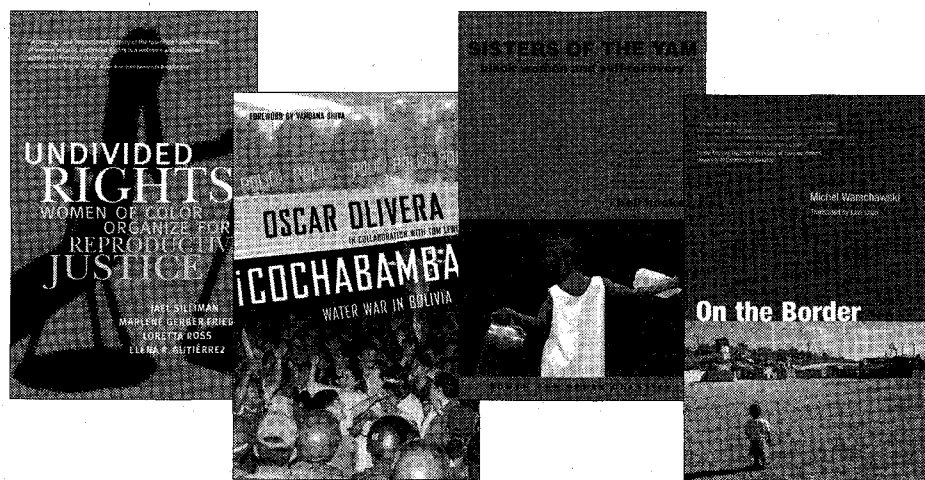
He deployed ideas and opinions in his art as a function of this sweeping-clean quality. Bellow used his imagination to build his separate continent while his

imagination used his intellect to clear a path for itself. No wonder he loved to portray gangsters, and sometimes to marry a tough-guy tone to alpine cerebrations. In Bellow's fiction, ideas are explosive, dazzling, intimidating lieutenants in flashy suits who push various troublemakers out of the way: powerful rivals, skeptics, critics of various stripes. Afterward, the imagination enters, passive and sympathetic where the intellect was merely commanding: dapper, elegant, elfin, feline. And then there is just Bellow and his hero, isolated and absolutely alone. And finally there is "nothing"—the penultimate, one-word sentence of *Herzog* (1964).

Bellow's portrait of a black pickpocket and exhibitionist in *Mr. Sammler's Planet* (1970) provoked accusations of racism, and his *opera buffa* challenge to academics to produce "the Tolstoy of the Zulus, the Proust of the Papuans" didn't help matters. Both episodes were instances of the old Bellowian mental path-clearing, to which Bellow subjected intellectuals and Catholics in *Herzog*, hypocritical religious Jews and capitalists in *Seize the Day*, middle-class Jews and upper-class WASPs in the short masterpiece *Mosby's Memoirs* (1968), politicians and journalists in *The Dean's December* (1982), poli-

ticians, academics, foundation heads in *Humboldt's Gift*—to which he subjected every famous thinker, illustrious writer, public figure, friend, lover, acquaintance whose power over his mind or heart interfered with his will. In *Mr. Sammler's Planet*, the target wasn't really the black man with the large phallus. It was a certain American-Jewish middle-class daydream of feral potency, a condescending fantasy purveyed by a rival, Norman Mailer, with his exoticizing fixation on the black phallus in his notorious essay "The White Negro."

Bellow's targets themselves sought Single Selfhood: Jewish con men, cruel Jewish fathers, black muggers, heartless WASP mandarins, strident multiculturalists, luckless flounders, impractical doomed poets. You followed Bellow on his creative-destructive quest to clear a space for his own "single self...proud of its detachment and its absolute immunity" because Bellow's panoramic journey enacted the American ego's numberless strategies for trying to get its way. What makes Bellow mesmerizing, transporting, addictive, even when he is affronting you with his defensive Olympian postures, is that he had the gift of sweeping through



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existence from high to low, encompassing every point in between, and making you feel the whole whenever he touched one of its parts.

Let Bellow could indeed put you off with his sometimes ludicrous visitor-from-another-planet generalizations about contemporary life—people don't even wipe themselves anymore, ruminates Ithiel Regler, Clara Velde's boyfriend, as he sits sniffing in the back of a New York taxi. (This astounding social observation was deleted in a later edition.) Bellow was especially hard on figures who possessed a will and ambition similar to his own. It got to be exasperating when he mocked "deep thinkers" because you realized that he was having his cake and eating it too, flaunting his intellectual capacities and dismissing his intellectual competitors by undermining their vocation. Late in his career, Bellow exclusively wrote fiction that took up his past, a place where his intellect didn't have to exact so many casualties for the sake of his imagination. Everyone was already dead.

And still, at his most rebarbative, Bel-

low's voice held you aloft, above the daily din of tragic reports and false consciousness. It was a comprehensive voice with a vulnerable core, whose lowliest concerns had a metaphysical ballast. Serenely certain, the Bellovian melody seemed to emanate from an eternal perspective. He was like a commuter from the Other Side. People join cults under the spell of an otherworldly confidence like that. Even when you saw through Bellow's trick of substituting for the idols he smashed his own contrivance of universal authority, he consoled you.

He consoled you because Bellow didn't stand for anything except being true to his own unfolding nature. We all want such authenticity for ourselves, no matter who we are; it's bracing to behold if it's done with Bellow's candor. And once Bellow had inspired you with his laughter at the cosmos, you yourself could laugh at his intellectual inflations and his spleen, proud of your immunity and your newfound detachment, and of all the things Bellow had taught you about being free. Which didn't mean he wouldn't have liked to sweep the world clean of you, too.

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turned away if unable to pay. Further info: kuznick@american.edu. <http://web.gc.cuny.edu/cepp/nuclearconference/>.

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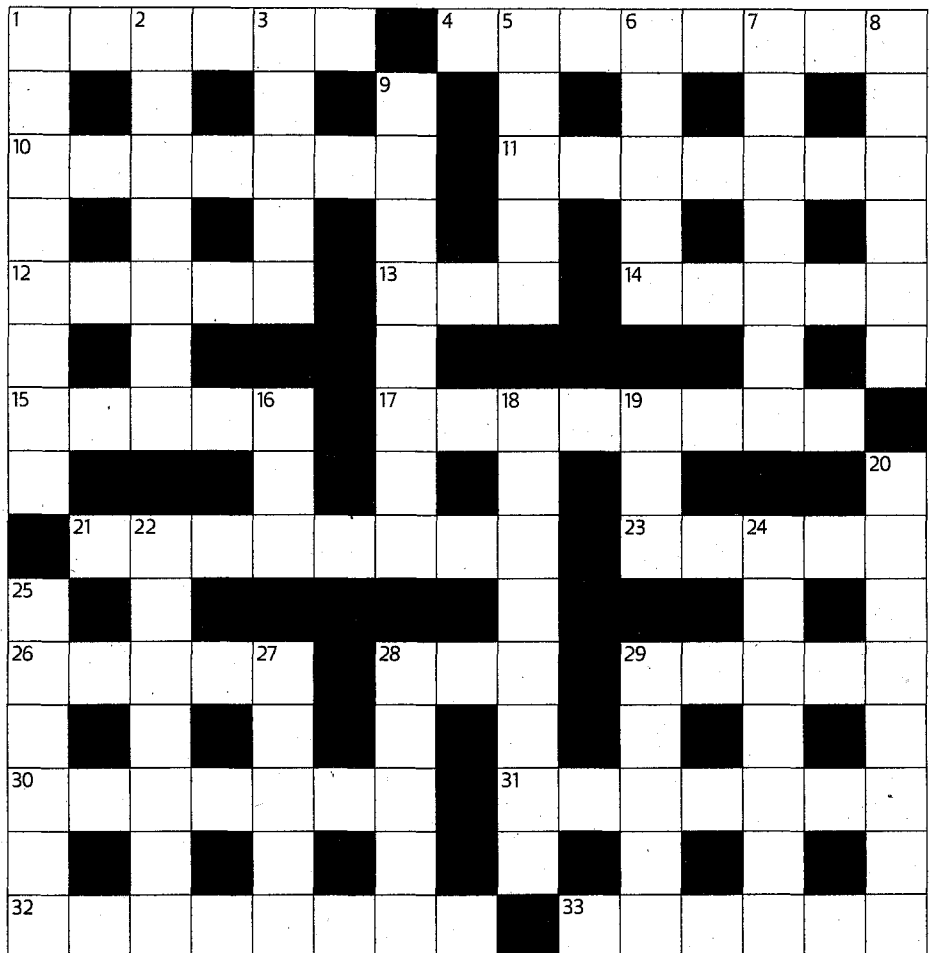
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ACROSS

- 1 I have nothing against the sort of creature who does a dance on the lake—but these people boast about their tall corn! (6)
- 4 From which one might have to retrace one's steps on the way out. (3-2-3)
- 10 A former member of the cast who may take excessive interest in his work. (7)
- 11 OPEC is a good example, but in the morning you will find a close friend there. (7)
- 12, 13 and 28 down What might be involved when the judge's decision was wrong. (It's a fumbling approach!) (5,3,5)
- 14 Where you can find tribal types and us possibly upset by it. (5)
- 15 It takes more than a 16 in England to make you this, and close-fisted, too. (5)
- 17 One might notify some that the payment is, with the finish about near. (8)
- 21 The Barber of Seville, for example, has an obvious truth going out badly with a large number. (8)
- 23 Bear this, for example, when associated with Roosevelt. (5)
- 26 One might be led to it and change the result, as one hears. (5)
- 28 See 16 down
- 29 Discovery doesn't have very much for the dancer here. (5)
- 30 One who listens for the checker possibly. (7)
- 31 The shaved part on top has a lot of weight, for certain! (7)
- 33 and 32 Photographers don't like it when a movie stand-in gets publicity. (6,8)

DOWN

- 1 and 25 The police lineup has one to study a little bird on your head, equal to a little drink. (8,6)
- 2 and 19 You and I, with the jewelry not safe, show it's getting in pretty bad shape. (7,3)
- 3 Referring to one's birth in Africa? (5)
- 5 and 8 The button one might push as well, with the elevator on the way, and likely to succeed in making it. (2-3-6)
- 6 Rushes to play in the pub, coming up with the best of strings. (5)
- 7 How the committee might stand with wrongdoing, having a point to pass on. (4,3)
- 8 See 5
- 9 Nice-looking adjunct, otherwise a moniker with part of the Bible. (8)
- 16 and 28 across A way to add up the little types that are on certain poles. (6)
- 18 Where experienced pitchers have no trouble with accommodation, and arrived with a few added words with it inside. (8)
- 19 See 2
- 20 Reputedly the yodeling type shows a beginner take to the French Quarter. (8)
- 22 What one did on the stage doesn't go down, but maybe got out of hand. (5,2)
- 24 The sign might tell you not to do it, with the bird flying around the student's head. (7)
- 25 See 1



- 27 What the British have to pay shows the value of things. (5)
- 28 See 12 across
- 29 A dog, when wild, can make the noise disappear. (5)

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of natural daylight indoors with a savings
of \$51 over the life of one bulb!*

Ever since the first human went into a dark cave and built a fire, people have realized the importance of proper indoor lighting. Unfortunately, since Edison invented the light bulb, lighting technology has remained relatively prehistoric. Modern light fixtures do little to combat many symptoms of improper lighting, such as eyestrain, dryness or burning. As more and more of us spend longer hours in front of a computer monitor, the results are compounded. And the effects of indoor lighting are not necessarily limited to physical well-being. Many people believe that the quantity and quality of light can play a part in one's mood and work performance. Now there's a better way to bring the positive benefits of natural sunlight indoors.

The Balanced Spectrum® floor lamp will change the way you see and feel about your living or work spaces. Studies show that sunshine can lift your mood and your energy levels. But as we all know the sun, unfortunately, does not always shine. So to bring the benefits of natural daylight indoors, use the floor lamp that simulates the full spectrum of daylight. You will see with more clarity and enjoyment as this lamp provides sharp visibility for close tasks and reduces eyestrain.

Its 27-watt compact bulb is the equivalent to a 150-watt ordinary light bulb. This makes it perfect for activities such as reading, writing, sewing, needlepoint, and especially for aging eyes.

We've looked at lots of lights, but this one offers the benefit of dual light levels of 27 and 18 watts of power equivalent to 150- and 100-watt incandescent bulbs. This lamp has a flexible gooseneck design for maximum efficiency, with an "Instant On" switch that is flicker-free. The high-tech electronics, user-friendly design, and bulb that lasts 10 times longer than an ordinary bulb make this lamp a must-have.

SAVE \$51 over the life of one Balanced Spectrum® bulb!

A 150-watt incandescent bulb uses \$0.013 per hour in energy cost. The Balanced Spectrum® bulb uses an average of **70% less energy** which saves you \$0.009 per hour. Based on 5,000 hours bulb life, the Balanced Spectrum® bulb will save **\$46** in energy cost. *Plus*, because the Balanced Spectrum® bulb lasts 10 times longer than an incandescent bulb priced at an average of \$0.50, an additional **\$5** savings is realized.

*Source: "Lighting the Way to Energy Savings"; 1999

Free Bonus Bulb - \$24.95 Value†



*Technology revolutionizes
the light bulb*

- 5,000 hours bulb life
- Energy efficient
- Shows true colors

Height as shown: 50"

"As soon as I turned on the lamp and began to read the newspaper I could see the wonderful difference. This lamp is just what I needed. Thank you so much."

Donna E.
Scranton, PA

Try the Balanced Spectrum® floor lamp for the best value ever! Now more than ever is the time to add sunshine to every room in your house at this fantastic low price! The Balanced Spectrum® floor lamp comes with a one-year manufacturer's limited warranty and firstSTREET's exclusive guarantee. Try this product for 90 days and return it for the product purchase price if not completely satisfied.

Balanced Spectrum® floor lamp

Item# 7T-3589 **\$59.95 ea** +S&H

†Order one Balanced Spectrum® floor lamp and get a **FREE Bonus Bulb**-a \$24.95 value!

- or -

††Order two Balanced Spectrum® floor lamps and get one **FREE Bonus Bulb** plus **FREE shipping** on both lamps.

††Free shipping within the Continental U.S. Only.

Please mention promotional code 29802.

For fastest service, call toll-free 24 hours a day

800-984-9224

To order by mail, please call for details
www.balancedspectrum.com

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